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Planting the Seeds of a Non-Racial Society: White Women as Agents of Change in July’s People, Disgrace, and A Blade of Grass

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Planting the Seeds of a Non-Racial Society:
White Women as Agents of Change in *July’s People*, *Disgrace*, and *A Blade of Grass*

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

at

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The undersigned hereby certify that they have read and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance a thesis entitled “Planting the Seeds of a Non-Racial Society: White Women as Agents of Change in July’s People, Disgrace, and A Blade of Grass” by Mike Madden in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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This work is dedicated to my wife, Sandra, whose absolute lack of interest in the project has compelled me to complete it in a timely manner, and to my daughter, Hallie, who I hope will always continue to share my love of reading.
# Table of Contents

**Abstract** ................................................................................................................................. vii

**Acknowledgements** ............................................................................................................... viii

**Chapter One – Introduction** .................................................................................................... 1

**Chapter Two – July’s People** ..................................................................................................... 11

  I. Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 11
  II. A Proud White Liberal: Maureen’s Urban Identity ............................................................ 13
  III. Bam and the Male Inability to Adapt and Evolve ............................................................... 19
  IV. Cultivating the Imagination: Maureen’s Evolution ............................................................ 25
  V. “She Runs”: Maureen’s Escape from the Patriarchy ......................................................... 34
  VI. Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 37

**Chapter Three – Disgrace** ...................................................................................................... 41

  I. Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 41
  II. The “Moral Dinosaur”: David Lurie and the White Male Ideology .................................... 43
  III. “Bend[ing] to the Tempest”: Lucy and the White Female Ideology .................................. 54
  IV. Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 62

**Chapter Four – A Blade of Grass** ............................................................................................ 67

  I. Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 67
  II. “The Missus”: Märit’s Early Identity .................................................................................. 68
  III. “The Same Now…Like Sisters”: The Utopian Phase of Märit’s Development ............. 77
  IV. Secrets, Soldiers, Lust, and Locusts: The Reality Phase of Märit’s Development .......... 82
  V. Sustained by the Fruit of Friendship: Reading the Novel’s Conclusion ......................... 86
  VI. Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 91
Chapter 5 – Conclusion ................................................................. 94

References .................................................................................... 99
ABSTRACT

This thesis examines three South African novels written about the interregnum, the period marking the transition from apartheid to post-apartheid eras. Specifically, Gordimer’s *July’s People*, Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, and DeSoto’s *A Blade of Grass* are studied in order to explore the function of white women as leaders of change in fiction of the interregnum.

After a brief introduction, the second chapter looks at Maureen Smales as she demonstrates the ability to adapt to her post-revolutionary society. The third chapter compares white male and female perspectives, as seen in the stubborn character of David Lurie, and in the accepting character of his daughter, Lucy Lurie. The fourth chapter follows the friendship between Märit Laurens and her black housekeeper, Tembi, as the white woman learns the value of non-racial friendship. The conclusion examines the implications of fictions that depict white women as the more adaptable, socially conscious gender of their race.
Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted to Dr. Andrew Wainwright and Dr. Alice Brittan, who both agreed to work with me on this project in spite of being on temporary periods of leave from Dalhousie University. Their recommendations and insight were of great assistance to me throughout the entire research and writing processes: “I was enriched by the experience.”
Chapter One – Introduction

South Africa, originally colonized by both the British and the Dutch, is populated by a black majority and is home to numerous people of Indian, Asian, and mixed race (or Coloured) ethnic backgrounds. In 1948, after decades of racist policies, the country’s National Party government enacted formal apartheid laws in order to segregate these different peoples, and to establish a racial hierarchy that privileged whites above other races. The government’s policy of apartheid deeply divided the country, and created enduring senses of antagonism and ill will among people of different races. In her essay, “Living in the Interregnum,” Nadine Gordimer suggests that South Africa’s historical treatment of non-whites represents the “ultimate expression” of nineteenth-century colonialism, manifested in the “legalised land- and mineral-grabbing, open in the labour exploitation of indigenous peoples, open in the constitutionalised, institutionalised racism” that is apartheid, “the ugliest creation of man” (262). Since the ratification of these draconian laws, the dream among morally conscious and philanthropic South Africans, such as Gordimer, has consistently been for the elimination of such racism as that embodied in apartheid, and for the establishment of a more egalitarian, non-racial society.

Gordimer, for her earlier novel, July’s People, selects a passage from Antonio Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks as an epigraph: “The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms.” Although her choice of introductory quotation is relevant to and partially explained by the contents of her novel, it is only in her subsequent essay on the subject that Gordimer fully defines the nature of South Africa’s interregnum, and the conditions that characterize the
country’s state of socio-political transition. Gordimer describes her society as “whirling, stamping, swaying with the force of revolutionary change,” and claims, “the sun that never set over one or other of the nineteenth-century colonial empires of the world is going down finally in South Africa” (262). In 1982, at the time Gordimer first wrote her essay, the country was essentially caught between the besieged apartheid reign of the National Party’s racist government, and the inevitable emergence (or metaphoric crowning) of a more representative black majority government. Gordimer is careful to point out, however, that “the interregnum is not only between two social orders but also between two identities, one known and discarded, the other unknown and undetermined” (269-270). In other words, the country’s interregnum cannot be immediately ended by a single event, such as the transfer of power from one government to another, but by the gradual acceptance of new identities, new states of being, by all South Africans.

In spite of the fact that, since the repealing of apartheid laws, the African National Congress has won three fully democratic elections, South Africa’s “post-apartheid dispensation is experienced as a lack – especially by still impoverished, under- and unemployed and unemployable blacks who have seen no palpable improvement in their quality of life and often find their lives to be more physically vulnerable under the new dispensation that it was under the old” (Farred 594). Clearly, many vestiges of the old, privileged identity of white South Africa and the associated subordinate, impotent identity of black South Africa remain in the country, even though the nation’s laws now offer equality to whites and blacks. Much has changed in South Africa, but much, particularly the distribution of material wealth and economic power, remains the same.
In this respect, it appears that the interregnum Gordimer described in 1982 continues into the present, and will likely persist for the foreseeable future.

Throughout this period of interregnum, certain white South African writers have seen themselves as having ethical, as well as artistic, obligations to their public; the ways in which whites deal with blacks and coloureds is seen as morally reprehensible to these writers, who use their seemingly elevated powers of perception and sensibility to consider the problems inherent in the society, and to suggest possibilities that might be useful in precipitating effective change. Unlike artists from more stable socio-political backgrounds, Gordimer suggests that white writers in South Africa have a unique duty to fulfill in their works: “The white writer’s task as a ‘cultural worker’ is to raise the consciousness of white people, who, unlike himself, have not woken up” (The Essential Gesture 293). In other words, these authors must strive to communicate, through their fictions, the manifest illegitimacy of apartheid’s social hierarchy. Consequently, I believe that Gordimer’s concept of interregnum and her interpretation of the white writer’s obligations during such a period of change are important in understanding not only her work, but also the fiction of more contemporary white South African writers, as they all try to capture the essence of South Africa’s era of transition, and as they address possibilities that might lead the country out of its interregnum and into a new, non-racial mode of existence.

In studying the various portrayals of apartheid and interregnum societies in different works of English South African literature by white writers, I was particularly struck by the similarities in how white women tend to be characterized by the respective authors. White women, as I discovered, historically occupied a unique place within the
collective social hierarchy prescribed by apartheid, being at once empowered by virtue of their race, and subordinated as a result of their gender:

The vision of racial superiority of the colonial settlers and later apartheid-era rulers went hand-in-hand with their gender ideologies and hierarchies […]. With colonisation, and later apartheid, those women of European descent were privileged politically, socially, and economically as were the gender hierarchies that entrenched male power (most specifically white male power) and further disempowered women (especially black women) of what power they had culturally or otherwise. Colonial rule and apartheid ideologies privileged specific types of femininity that were typically domestically focused. (Britton 148)

Throughout the era of apartheid, it seems that this colonial, patriarchal social order was preserved intact; the country’s policies of segregation were, after all, developed and initiated by the white male government of Daniel Francois Malan, and during a time that preceded the 1960s feminist and women’s movements that took place elsewhere in the world. Britton goes on to point out that, “throughout much of the period, all women regardless of race were publicly silenced and were obstructed from participating in formal political life” (148) – even white women were excluded from circles of social and political power, in spite of the privileged status afforded to them by apartheid. Evidence of the lingering entrenchment of patriarchal authority in South Africa is also apparent in the country’s shockingly high number of rapes;¹ in a disturbing study of these incidences of rape, Helen Moffett claims that rape “functions as a source of patriarchal control,” and she suggests that, “under apartheid, the dominant group used methods of regulating

¹ It has recently been estimated that one in three South African women will be raped in her lifetime (Moffet 129).
blacks and reminding them of their subordinate status,” but that rape has now replaced apartheid policies in South Africa as a primary means of demonstrating masculine authority (132), by men of all races (134). Thus, although forms of patriarchal authority in South Africa have shifted from political (legally sanctioned apartheid) to social (male dominance of women through violent sex crimes), the underlying power structure of that society remains predominantly patriarchal.

At this point, however, it is important to define and consider the cultural and historical distinctions that exist between South Africa’s two major categories of white citizens. The country was originally occupied by the Dutch in the mid-seventeenth century as a replenishment base for vessels travelling onward to India (Sparks 25), but was annexed by the British in 1795 as part of a more global effort to expand and strengthen the British Empire (45). The Dutch settlers became known as Afrikaners; this group gradually migrated inland from the Cape Colony, and established themselves as a predominantly agrarian people. They developed a Dutch-based language of their own (Afrikaans), and cultivated a sense of national identity that was clearly independent of most ties to Holland. It has been suggested that their society stagnated for a century and a half after arriving in Africa, and became “the most backward fragment of European civilization on earth” (45), and in many social and philosophical ways, they lagged behind the rest of the Western world until the end of the twentieth century.

The British settlers, on the other hand, brought commercial and industrial technology from “the world’s most modern society” with them when they annexed the

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2 Moffet reports having discovered during her time as a hotline counsellor that rape is not the exclusive “province of poor, black, or ill-educated men […]. Sexual violence is an instrument of gender domination and is rarely driven by a racial agenda” (134).
colony, and essentially “created modern South Africa” (Sparks 45-46). In spite of their contributions to South Africa’s development, however, the British were historically outnumbered by the Afrikaners, so the Afrikaners typically dominated the domains of government, civil service, and agriculture, while the British concentrated on the economic sector, including commerce and the mining trade (47). The Afrikaners, as a white minority in a black and brown land, saw themselves as having a God-given mission to establish a homeland for themselves in South Africa, while the British were a “curiously helpless and rather pathetic community […] with little sense of any collective identity” (47). Based on these histories it is not surprising that it was Malan’s Afrikaner National Party government that implemented apartheid policies, while the English-speaking people remained mostly silent about apartheid, not identifying “with either [Afrikaner or Black] side in the conflict of nationalisms” that became the country’s greatest focus during the latter half of the twentieth century.

Although the rural Afrikaner culture was strongly traditional and patriarchal in nature, and the urban culture of English-speaking South African whites was more liberal by comparison, the entire country was so preoccupied with racial conflict throughout the twentieth century that it failed to fully experience many of the social movements that took place throughout Europe and North America. Consequently, while other parts of the Western world made great progress in advancing the rights of historically subjugated groups, such as women and gays, South African society remains, to this day, “one of

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3 In 1990, for example, English-speaking South Africans numbered only 1.7 million out of a total white population of 4.9 million (Sparks 47).

4 For further evidence of rampant sexism and homophobia in South Africa, as recently as August 2007, see Kandy Ringer’s news article “A Climate of Violent Homophobia Mars South Africa’s Celebration of Women’s Day.”
manifest sexism, homophobia and xenophobia” (Moffet 142). In other words, among other things, it remains a largely patriarchal society, across the full spectrum of the country’s social and racial composition.

White rural South Africa, as it is depicted in much of the country’s contemporary fiction, still conforms to old patriarchal social models, whereby husbands work the land and preside over their households, while wives shop, drink tea, and preserve the values of domesticity. Even among the more urban English whites, attitudes of deference by females to the absolute authority invested in white males are common in such works of fiction, and evidence of the prevalence of rape in South Africa is sometimes contained within the narratives. Thus, in spite of the obvious social superiority white women had over blacks and coloureds as a result of apartheid legislation, they also seem to have known what it meant to be inferior to others.

I believe that this unique, somewhat contradictory place held by white women within apartheid-era South African society is deliberately explored by certain writers, in order to investigate the role that gender might play in the facilitation of social transition through South Africa’s interregnum. In three particular novels, *July’s People* by Nadine Gordimer, *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee, and *A Blade of Grass* by Lewis DeSoto, the authors focus specifically on the role that English-speaking white women⁵ have to play within the emerging South Africa by incorporating dynamic, insightful female perspectives into their respective narratives. These novels are all set in various forms of South African

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⁵ In order to avoid repetition, I will often refer simply to “white women” throughout this thesis when I believe it will be clear that I am writing specifically about white women of British, not Afrikaner, origin. Unfortunately, as Sparks has pointed out, these descendants of British settlers “do not even have a proper name: ‘English-speaking South Africans’ is an appellation so vague as to make them almost anonymous” (47), and one so cumbersome that I will attempt to simplify it whenever possible.
interregnum environments, whether in the post-revolutionary future Gordimer imagined in 1981, the post-apartheid (but still highly racial) reality described by Coetzee in 1999, or the past as conceived by DeSoto in 2003. _July’s People_ and _A Blade of Grass_ focus predominantly on white female characters, while _Disgrace_ features a white woman as a secondary character (but as I will later discuss, the novel employs literary techniques that foreground the importance of this lesser character to the narrative as a whole). All three of the female protagonists clearly come from British, not Afrikaner, cultural backgrounds. In short, the settings and characters of these three novels provide the ideal basis for my study of the function of English-speaking white women in literature from South Africa’s interregnum.

In spite of the significant differences that exist between the above novels in form and content, they share some commonality in their presentation and development of white women; specifically, each of the three white female protagonists demonstrates the ability to abandon apartheid-influenced, conventional modes of viewing and interacting with society. These women ultimately show that they are prepared to accept the necessity of change in ways that clearly set them apart from their respective male counterparts. Thus, in this thesis I will argue that _July’s People_, _Disgrace_, and _A Blade of Grass_ each contain, in their presentations of key white female characters, the suggestion that the hope for a non-racial South Africa lies in the acceptance of certain “female” values and roles by members of the white population. In other words, even though these works all demonstrate some of the inevitable horrors that lie ahead during

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6 I use quotation marks around the word female in this case to indicate that I am referring to the values and attitudes demonstrated by the three female protagonists in the novels being studied, and not to any preconceived gender stereotypes that I hold or that I expect readers of this thesis to share.
the progression through South Africa’s interregnum, they also show, in chronologically increasing relevance and complexity, how English-speaking white women function within the texts as pioneers in the establishment of new roles for whites in a post-apartheid South Africa.

As with most works of South African literature produced during or about the apartheid era, significant criticism has been devoted to the study of race and racism in July’s People and Disgrace. However, very little attention has been given to the intersecting domains of race and gender within these texts. Most critics tend to treat the question of gender in July’s People somewhat peripherally, focusing more closely on the black-white power dynamic between Maureen Smales and her former servant, July. André Brink most closely addresses the relationship between gender and race in the novel in his article, “Complications of Birth: Interfaces of Gender, Race and Class in July’s People,” but he restricts the scope of his discussion by striving only for a clearer reading of the novel’s conclusion, rather than for a more broad understanding of how the novel fits into the larger body of ethically motivated apartheid literature. In studies of Disgrace, it is also common for the link between (female) gender and (black) race to be overlooked, since Lucy Lurie, the white female protagonist, features much less prominently in the narrative than her father, David Lurie, and since her actions in the narrative can often be so difficult to interpret conclusively. A Blade of Grass, the most recently released of the three novels, and written by a lesser-known expatriate of South Africa, has not been the subject of any published scholarly attention to date, so my discussion of Märit’s function as a white woman within the narrative will be, to my knowledge, the first of its sort.
The argument that follows will be divided into separate discussions of each novel, followed by a concluding chapter that will attempt to draw significance from the common phenomenon of such dynamic white female characters in diverse works of apartheid-era South African literature. Chapter Two will examine Maureen’s pre-revolution identity in July’s People, and then document how the character changes that take place in her (but not in her white male husband) after a revolution demonstrate her female potential to lead social and racial change in South Africa. Chapter Three will contrast the white male and female ideologies espoused by David and Lucy Lurie in Disgrace, to reveal the greater capacity for tolerance that exists in Lucy, the white woman. Chapter Four will follow Märit’s character transformation as she becomes free from the constraints of her patriarchal native society, to illustrate how she acquires a true understanding of and appreciation for the concept of non-racial friendship in A Blade of Grass. Throughout this thesis, I hope to demonstrate the recurring tendency of the authors of these novels to cast their white female characters as agents of social and racial change in environments that remain mired in different states of interregnum, societies that remain resistant to the full abandonment of apartheid’s legacies. In my conclusion, I will attempt to interpret the implications of this character trend in the context of the authorial obligations that Gordimer assigns in “The Essential Gesture” to white writers of South African origin and that other writers seem to willingly accept in their fictions.
Chapter Two – July’s People

I. Introduction

Nadine Gordimer’s novel, July’s People, begins with the following epigraph, which the author attributes to Antonio Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks: “The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms.” Gordimer’s selection of this quotation as a preface to her novel clearly reflects her preoccupation with the idea of South Africa’s transition between old and new social orders, and foreshadows the subsequent publication of her socio-political essay “Living in the Interregnum.” Although July’s People is set in the future, during the days that immediately follow a massive militant revolution of South Africa’s blacks, the novel is less a prediction of what might actually transpire in the country than an examination of “the pre-revolutionary present – an exploration of that fearful condition of intermediacy” (Neill 72) that already exists between the waning legacy of apartheid and the forecast, but unattained, future era of equality. In other words, although the “‘disaster scenario’ of violent revolution and ensuing anarchy” (Folks 116) described in July’s People has not yet come to pass in South Africa at the time of the novel’s publication, one can infer from the text that the gradual process of black empowerment and the associated decline of white authority in the country has already begun. The prime concern of the novel, then, lies in addressing the difficulties and conflicts that inevitably result during the transitional period between the collapse of apartheid and the establishment of stable, effective black government.

This post-revolutionary scenario that Gordimer presents in July’s People creates the setting for a critical moment in the lives of her two white protagonists, Maureen and
Bam, wherein each is forced, under the kind of duress that could be encountered during the transition of power from whites to blacks, to renegotiate their role in society. Under these harsh circumstances, I will argue, Maureen displays a willingness to interrogate and confront her earlier assumptions, and therefore to accept a new place for herself in her environment, while Bam simply tries to import his old, patriarchal paradigms into his new reality, thereby negating any possibility for meaningful change in his character. This distinction between the characters is significant, since, as André Brink has asserted, “whatever any individual character in the story does is inevitably invested with the fate of ‘his kind’ or ‘their kind’” (176); thus, Maureen’s capacity for evolution and Bam’s failure to adapt to his new surroundings can be said to provide metonymic indications of the different levels of potential that exist in all white South African women and men, respectively, to participate constructively in post-apartheid social changes. If one accepts Folks’ argument that Nadine Gordimer’s quasi-futuristic fictions serve “both to dispel apprehension” about the uncertain future, “and to examine alternatives” (116), then it appears that the author presents Maureen’s character (a white woman representative of her urban, British “kind”) in order to demonstrate an alternative to the present/future in which English-speaking white women lead the transition through South Africa’s interregnum. In other words, I will argue, the chronicling of Maureen’s obvious transformation in the post-revolutionary world of July’s People points to the essential function her character has in effecting the kind of social change that will eventually give rise to a new, post-apartheid racial dynamic.
II. A Proud White Liberal: Maureen’s Urban Identity

Through a series of flashbacks and memories scattered throughout July’s People, readers derive an idea of what Maureen was like “back there” (Gordimer 36), in the time before the revolution, which provides a necessary point of departure for any discussion of her development in the novel. First and foremost, it appears, Maureen arrives in July’s village as a woman who lacks a true sense of identity: her concept of self is defined not by who she is, cognitively, but by entirely external factors, such as her possessions and her relationships with others. It is significant, for example, that the first mention of names in July’s People, the first identification of the white protagonists whose story, among others, the narrative tells, reads as follows: “Maureen and Bam Smales. Bamford Smales, Smales, Caprano & Partners, Architects. Maureen Hetherington from Western Area Gold Mines. Under 10s Silver Cup for Classical and Mime at the Johannesburg Eisteddfod” (2). In this novel where the story is presented “as perceived by Maureen and a narrator who shares her angle of vision, if not her values” (Greenstein 241), it is telling, on several levels, that Maureen is described (and sees herself) only in the following terms: as the wife of a professional architect, as a child raised on a gold mine (around one of the country’s strongest apartheid-era industries), and as a successful participant in a childhood cultural festival. Bam’s association with his work and Maureen’s similar association with dance provide early indicators of the entrenchment of patriarchal gender roles within their relationship: Bam occupies the typically practical, male domain of having a trade and providing for the family, while Maureen occupies the more creative, female domain of artistic pastimes. At the same time, the fact that Maureen is defined by her results at a cultural festival of Welsh origin, the tradition of which is obviously
transplanted to South Africa by early settlers, gives evidence of the firm hold that colonial influences have upon Maureen, even in her youth – Maureen thinks of herself in distinctly British, not black terms. Thus, at first glance, readers can see how Maureen’s conception of self is thrust upon her by society, and how “Maureen Smales has uncritically accepted the consciousness that she has been taught in childhood and adolescence” (Folks 118).

I am not alone in recognizing Maureen’s tendency to think of herself in terms of her connections to others; citing different examples in the text where Maureen is described as being daughter, wife, mother, and Madam to various people, André Brink also comments, “before the family’s flight from Johannesburg her identity used always to be defined in terms of her relationships with others” (163). I believe, however, that Maureen also tends to understand herself in terms of her possessions. This manner of thinking was likely passed down to Maureen from her mother, who differentiated between Maureen’s father and the family’s servant by calling them “My Jim” and “Our Jim” (3), respectively. Such nomenclature, apart from distinguishing between two men of the same given name, helps to solidify the relationship of the white family to their servant, with the possessive “our” reinforcing the sense of white superiority that forms the foundation of apartheid. In light of this upbringing, it is not surprising that Maureen sees possessions such as “Bam’s growing savings and investments, [her] little legacy of De Beers shares her maternal grandfather had left her, the house there was less and less opportunity of selling” (8), as being so fundamental to her identity that they actually determine whether she stays in or leaves South Africa. Bodenheimer supports this reading of Maureen’s attitudes, arguing that “the Smales couple manifest the ‘morbid
symptoms’ of a dying consumer culture in which identity is created by ownership” (109). This link between Maureen’s possessions and her sense of identity would not be particularly revealing under different socio-political circumstances; however, in the context of apartheid-era South Africa, where whites legitimized their “ownership” of the country’s valuable resources by forcing the native blacks to resettle in poorer “homeland” territories, Maureen’s conception of self as a product of her possessions marks her as someone who is at least partially aligned with the forces of apartheid. Likewise, after the family flees the city, the fact that “it was some days before the vehicle ceased to be the point of reference for their existence” (13) is understandable, since the bakkie is so fundamentally essential in defining who the Smaleses are: rich whites who can afford the luxury of a recreational vehicle. As these examples indicate, Maureen’s concept of self before the revolution, and in the first days immediately following her arrival in July’s village, is based principally on the wealth and professional accomplishments of male others in her life (such as her father, grandfather, and husband), and has very little to do with any kind of understanding of her own internal psyche.

After the revolution, when Maureen does reflect on the beliefs and values she thinks she has held throughout her life, readers discover that she could only superficially be considered a white “liberal.” Although she and Bam are “sickened” by the thought that they might “have lived out their whole lives as they were, born white pariah dogs in a black continent” (8), and although they imagined the possibility of visiting July in his village “as a friend” (38), their egalitarian philosophies come unraveled when they are

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7 Although, in the context of white South African society, the family would probably be considered middle, not upper class, it is nonetheless accurate to think of both levels of social stratification as being “rich” relative to the majority of the (black) population who live in poverty.
confronted with the reality of material loss, such as when July begins to claim a form of ownership of the bakkie. Even though July first takes the truck to go “to the shops” (53), procuring basic necessities for the Smaleses, both Bam and Maureen feel immense stress at the thought of losing the vehicle, and take out their frustrations on one another in an ugly quarrel that marks the start of a gradual (and eventually total) deterioration of their relationship (44-47). As the bakkie incident illustrates, their liberal attitudes are merely a façade, an indulgence that subsists only until they are required to make their first sacrifice: “They treat blacks as equals and believe in their cause, but they are not ready to part with their possessions and privilege. This disjuncture between the Smaleses’ political and economic views accounts for their inability to understand the nature of July’s claim on their car” (Erritouni 74). In this respect, there is a distinct gap between Maureen’s initial beliefs and her behaviour, an inconsistency that is, in large part, responsible for the cognitive dissonance she feels at the climax of the novel when she reevaluates her original attitudes. It is clear, however, that any preliminary assessment of Maureen’s character will reveal her commitment to the liberal ideal is shallow, at best.  

In continuing this discussion of Maureen’s identity, as it is first presented in July’s People, one is also struck by the arrogant assumptions she makes about July and his ways of life. Maureen believes she has some special relationship with July, and that she appreciates many of his subtleties better than her husband. She is convinced that the quotidian exchanges she shared with the servant back in Johannesburg, the brief sets of instructions and responses she spoke to him using “the habit of translation into very

8 As one discovers by reading “Living in the Interregnum,” however, Gordimer suggests that “the liberal ideal” itself is shallow, and is a concept worthy of our collective suspicions.
simple, concrete vocabulary” (72), have somehow given her a profound insight into the black man’s character: “Often Bam couldn’t follow his broken English, but he and she understood each other well” (13). Whenever July speaks to the white couple, for example, Maureen “always took on the responsibility of assuming herself addressed; she was the one who understood him, the way he expressed himself” (61). In each of the last two textual citations, the implication is that Maureen, while perhaps having a better grasp of July’s rudimentary English than Bam, also professes to “know” and identify with July better: Maureen does not simply claim a strength in decoding July’s language, she actually believes she understands July, the mind behind the man, better than anyone else. Thus, at the outset of July’s People, one of Maureen’s more prominent personality traits is a self-righteous confidence in her knowledge of “the other,” a confidence that readers immediately recognize will be problematic for her, given the novel’s racial focus.

Perhaps the most noteworthy detail about Maureen’s character in the initial stages of July’s People, though, is how profoundly entrenched she is in the role her patriarchal society has assigned to her as a woman. Brink argues that, “throughout the narrative, Bam’s behaviour is consistent with the male role as defined by the patriarchy, that is one of hunting and gathering and providing, of activity and decision […] while the female is largely confined to the domestic scene”⁹ (161). Brink cites Bam’s frequent hunting trips and his purchase of the bakkie as affirmations “of his right to self-fulfillment,” and suggests that Maureen’s submission to his desires signifies not only an acquiescence, but

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⁹ André Brink is an Afrikaner, and his sense of traditional gender roles in South Africa is likely deeply shaped by that fact. Nonetheless, I believe he accurately captures the essence of white male and female role dynamics (not necessarily as they exist in any racial segment or sub-segment of South African society, but as they are presented in the text of July’s People) in the above quotation.
a certain pleasure in her husband’s dominance over her: “She can find fulfillment only in *his* achievement” (162 – emphasis in original). Although Brink fails to account for the transformation that takes place later in the novel, after which Maureen begins to occupy both the traditionally male and female domains, he is correct in identifying the initial gendering that takes place in the narrative. Taking his argument one step further, I believe that the type of occupations Maureen finds for herself upon arriving in July’s village also provide strong indications of her subordinate status within the patriarchy, and of her initially unquestioning acceptance of that status. While Bam finds work for himself installing a water tank for the village (24-25), for example, Maureen reads the “thick paperback” novel she brought from the city (28); in other words, Maureen quickly assumes the *leisure-based* gender role she has imported from her urban white society, and allows Bam to keep his identity as the *working* head of the household. Even the items that Bam and Maureen remember to pack with them when they flee their Johannesburg house give indication of the gender-based domains that each character feels a need to occupy: “He had a gun; he had brought his twelve-bore shot-gun as she had remembered toilet paper” (41). These roles are reinforced when July comes back from “shopping” with the bakkie, quoting his expenses to his former employers in order to be reimbursed. Maureen immediately defers to Bam as her superior and the financial authority of the family, saying, “Bam, we must pay July” (54), implying that she cannot take care of this “business,” this male act of settling the debt, by herself. Maureen’s acceptance of her gender-based place of subordination within apartheid’s patriarchy, as seen in these

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10 Ironically, Maureen’s reading and Bam’s work prove equally futile, as they both realize early failures in their attempts to transport old gender roles into their new surroundings.
examples, is significant because it provides an essential frame of reference from which to judge her character transformation later in the novel.

Based on all the information provided about Maureen’s life “back there,” in Johannesburg, and on what is seen of her in the first few days after her departure from the city, readers begin to understand how poorly Maureen is prepared for the kind of massive changes that a racial revolution brings to her life. She has a limited level of self-knowledge, understanding her identity only in terms of who she is to others and what she possesses; she deceives herself about her economic and political beliefs (because they are apparently inseparable in South Africa); she arrogantly assumes to know and identify with July; and, she contents herself with occupying a position subordinate to her husband in her social and family hierarchies. An appreciation of all these elements of Maureen’s initial character is necessary in establishing the baseline from which she matures and develops as the narrative progresses.

III. Bam and the Male Inability to Adapt and Evolve

Since, as was already pointed out, the novel is written predominantly from Maureen’s perspective, it is more difficult to make a detailed assessment of Bam’s initial character – the reader is simply given less insight and evidence into what Bam was like before the revolution. Nonetheless, since he comes from an environment that is similar or identical to Maureen’s, it is logical and relatively uncontentious to assert that Bam begins July’s People with essentially the same socio-political paradigms as Maureen. Although this claim is somewhat of a simplification, it allows one to overlook the arguably minor differences that Gordimer presents in Bam and Maureen at the beginning
of the novel, in order to focus on the more compelling matter of how these two characters independently respond to their altered surroundings once they arrive in July’s village. In other words, I believe the more important consideration is how Maureen and Bam’s identities diverge as the novel progresses, not how they are alike when it begins.

Bam’s first instinct upon settling into July’s world is to try to impose all the structures, values, and roles of his old society upon the new one. Thus, even though the Smales family has a limited amount of clothing, and they are in an environment where concepts of modesty are presumably much more permissive than in the city, Bam still gives Maureen a “‘for God’s sake?’ glance of enquiry” when she wakes up one morning wearing a sweater but no pants (52), since he expects her to uphold urban standards of decorum even while in the bush. In other examples, seeing himself as ever the head of the patriarchy, Bam takes it upon himself to act as benefactor for the village by installing a water supply in the form a rain collection tank (24-25), and by hunting wart-hogs, ensuring “his function as a provider of meat settled upon him as a status” (77). Although Bam initially achieves successes when he takes on the familiar male roles of hunter and provider, his unthinking assumption of what he must believe to be his rightful place in society, and his efforts to maintain his white values, demonstrate Bam’s inability to reassess how he must live in the new community.

In the same way that Bam cannot let go of the roles he traditionally fulfills within the patriarchy of apartheid, he also clings to his material possessions from “back there,” and to the concepts that they represent. While July is away with the bakkie, for instance, Maureen notes that, “on the bed the man kept glancing at his watch but she knew hers was a useless thing, here” (43), since the very idea of measuring time in minutes and
seconds is pointless in a society that accounts more for the passing of days and seasons. Similarly, Bam often tunes in to the radio (25, 37, 44, 50, 124), hoping to receive some transmission from or about the world of white civilization that he ideologically condemns, because, even though he will not acknowledge it to himself, he longs for a return to that world. Although, as Brink has observed, Maureen also expresses periodic interest in radio broadcasts, “Bam is the one who does the tuning – except once, when Maureen gives it a try, and fails” (161). Bam’s fixation on the technology of his urban civilization is presented as distinctly male in its magnitude and frequency of manifestations, and signifies the architect’s reluctance to relinquish past ways of life.

From a social, or racial, perspective, the above demonstrations of how Bam attempts to bring his white, patriarchal values with him to July’s village merely serve to illuminate Bam’s continued unconscious acceptance of his racial superiority to blacks. After July returns with the bakkie for the first time, for example, the supposedly “liberal” white man is surly with him: “Bam had not greeted him. Maureen was unbelieving to see on the white man’s face the old sardonic, controlled challenge of the patron” (53). In this scenario where the Smales’ entire situation changed, almost overnight, Bam remarkably seems willing to pretend that nothing has changed: he condescends to July, automatically reverts to the role of master,11 and calls upon the black man to account for his whereabouts, all while partaking of July’s volunteered hospitality. Bam is unable to grasp the fact that the social structures put into place by apartheid are gone, and that the master-servant power dynamic that once existed with July has been permanently altered.

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11 Ironically, while Maureen and Bam take offence to “the Simon Legree term” of “master” (111), and try to teach July to use the more “ubiquitously respectful ‘sir’” (52), Bam has no difficulty in assuming the persona of master when it suits him.
Bam’s inability to adapt to his new environment eventually precipitates in him a process of gradual emasculation that continues through to the end of novel. The first signs of his weakening are seen immediately after July takes the bakkie for the first time, when Bam admits to himself that “he felt humbled, towards Maureen, but saw she did not share this” (40). The perceived “theft” of the truck, itself a symbol of Bam’s masculinity and his status as patriarch, destabilizes the old balance in his relationship with Maureen, and initiates a small transfer of power to her within the marriage. Bam does, however, retain the other major symbol of his male role and authority, the shotgun, and reclaims some of his lost status when he uses this weapon to kill two pigs for the village (77), but the gain is only temporary. After the euphoric moment of meat-eating festivity passes, Bam is once again reduced to something less than a man, in Maureen’s eyes: “What was he here, an architect lying on a bed in a mud hut, a man without a vehicle” (98). Maureen’s comment highlights the uselessness of Bam’s old identity in the new environment, and invites questions about the validity of his status as patriarch in the first place. Almost all the props that supported Bam’s authority are now gone, including both the pride and power he derived from his status as a professional in the city, and the machine upon which he relied for his mobility; he is thus left vulnerable and exposed, and the strength of his patriarchal claim upon the leadership of the family starts to crumble.

As Bam begins to understand that he is failing in his male role as the head of the household, he becomes further and further emasculated. When Victor asks Bam to buy an old car radiator, for example, Bam “felt unable to answer his son” (114), and finds himself at a complete loss in this world where money, the fundamental currency of his
capitalist society, has no use. Later, after Maureen has proven herself more adept than he at dealing with July’s chief, Bam begins to feel intimidated by his wife: “Now she was actually saying something, not provoking him to give himself away in some manner he didn’t understand; he didn’t want either to slip the frail noose or tighten it on himself by the wrong reaction” (128). In other words, Bam senses his precarious position in the relationship, and sees Maureen as already more in control than him. The final blow to Bam’s masculinity, the one that causes him to give up the struggle and concede all power to Maureen, is dealt to him when his shotgun is stolen. At that moment, Bam fully understands (even though he cannot articulate) his impotence, and how all his old authority was rooted in white patriarchal structures that simply are not present in July’s village:

If he couldn’t pick up the phone and call the police whom he and she had despised for their brutality and thuggery in the life lived back there, he did not know what else to do [...]. He lay down on his back, on that bed, the way he habitually did; and at once suddenly rolled over onto his face, as the father had never done before his sons. (145)

For the second time, Bam cannot address his sons because he has failed to provide them with an adequate model of manliness and patriarchal conduct. Bam’s act of rolling over is significant in that it is at once an admission of defeat, a pronouncement of despair, and a gesture of submission to the new authority in the family, Maureen. After this incident, Bam essentially fades from the narrative, being relegated to the feminine role of caregiver for the children (154), and having only two more insignificant lines of dialogue with Maureen (155) before his total disappearance from the text: “He becomes an anonymous
creature of purely negative definitions” (Neill 91). All of these examples, however, demonstrate that Bam’s failures as a father and husband are directly attributable to his insistence on thinking in the outmoded terms of his native society, and on his inability to adapt his paradigms to suit his new surroundings.

Maureen and Bam are essentially presented with two options in *July’s People*: they must either evolve or face extinction. Rather than evolve by changing in response to his new environment, Bam instead undergoes a kind of regression\(^\text{12}\) that, if followed through to its logical conclusion, will likely lead to his destruction. He is a broken man at the end of the novel, powerless and hopeless, and readers have no cause to suspect that his prospects are ever likely to improve. Returning to the idea of Bam as a metonymic representation of the South African white male population, then, Gordimer seems to suggest that the kind of change necessary to end the country’s interregnum, to bring about a new racial order, requires a total rejection of the patriarchy that creates and perpetuates apartheid policies. Bam’s fate at the novel’s conclusion, however, implies that this psychological evolution may be unachievable for most white men, since they are too entrenched, too invested in the patriarchy to abandon its familiar structures. Bam perhaps serves as the novelist’s warning of what will become of those who will not or cannot change their ways in response to South Africa’s social/racial revolution.

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\(^{12}\) This Darwinian regression is underscored in the text by a reference to Bam as having “the baffled obstinacy of a sad intelligent primate fingering the lock on his bars” (50) when he attempts to tune the radio.
IV. Cultivating the Imagination: Maureen’s Evolution

Northrop Frye, in The Educated Imagination, lectures on the importance of exercising the imagination through the study of literature, both asking and answering his central question in the following passage:

So, you may ask, what is the use of studying a world of imagination where anything is possible and anything can be assumed, where there are no rights or wrongs and all arguments are equally good? One of the most obvious uses, I think, is its encouragement of tolerance. In the imagination, our own beliefs are also only possibilities, but we can also see the possibilities in the beliefs of others. Bigots and fanatics seldom have any use for the arts, because they’re so preoccupied with their beliefs and actions that they can’t see them as also possibilities. (45-46)

Frye’s theory about the correlation between imagination and tolerance is particularly relevant to a study of July’s People (and to most kinds of South African writing that address the racism and bigotry inherent in apartheid, for that matter), since one of the first things Maureen realizes after losing all the comforts of her white society is how she has consistently failed to visualize and appreciate the conditions in which black South Africans have existed throughout the legacy of apartheid. Reflecting on the impractical gifts she has sent home with July, for instance, Maureen admits that she has “never seen, never imagined” July’s wife in any thoughtful kind of manner (16), and later, after setting aside the Italian novel she is reading, Maureen recognizes that “no fiction could compete with what she was finding she did not know, could not have imagined or discovered
through the imagination”\(^{13}\) (29), now that she lives within July’s society. I believe that Maureen’s acknowledgement of her imaginative failures, failures that implicitly upheld policies of apartheid through a lack of empathy for the subjugated black race, marks an important turning point for her character, as it signals her readiness to begin the evolutionary process that will see her renegotiate her role in a post-revolutionary South African society. As I document this character change in Maureen, I will attempt to demonstrate how, unlike Bam, she develops a heightened sense of imagination that eventually allows her to know and identify with “the other” in her life, July.

In the face of massive changes brought about by the revolution, Maureen’s transformation begins, probably sub-consciously, at the practical level. Unlike Bam, who clings to philosophical abstractions throughout the novel,\(^ {14}\) Maureen immediately abandons the absolute values of her society (stealing is wrong) in order to procure malaria pills necessary for the family’s survival: “I looted. From the pharmacy. After they attacked the shops” (38). Maureen’s willingness to take on new tasks, to do things that she would never have done before the revolution, is seen again when she drowns a litter of kittens (potential competitors for the village’s scarce resources) in a bucket of

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\(^ {13}\) In this passage, Gordimer, among other things, casts light on the limitations of her own fiction in communicating the reality of the racial situation in South Africa. An interesting parallel can be drawn here between the positions of Maureen, within the text, and Gordimer’s readers, who, in their perceptions of South Africa and apartheid, perhaps suffer from similar failures of the imagination.

\(^ {14}\) For example, Bam remains convinced, in spite of the power struggle in which he is engaged with July, that black is good and white is bad. He is appalled when July’s chief asks about borrowing the shotgun to defend against rival tribes: “You’re not going to take guns and let the white government kill blacks, are you? […] You musn’t let the government make you kill each other. The whole black nation is your nation” (120). Unlike Maureen, Bam does not see the problems inherent in his philosophies and abstractions when they are applied to the real world, problems such as the important distinctions that exist between black nations.
water (89). Bam expresses “disgust” and “distaste” at the idea of Maureen getting her hands dirty in such a manner, asking, “Why didn’t you get one of them to do it?” (89-90), but Maureen’s new found sense of self-sufficiency will not allow her to continue enjoying any luxuries that come about through the exploitation of blacks. Maureen then proceeds to work side by side with July’s wife gathering spinach for her family (92), refusing to accept the place of idleness and dependency that Bam, and later July (96), try to assign to her within the old patriarchy. Maureen begins to see her survival as a personal responsibility, and demonstrates that she is prepared to expand the boundaries of her traditional female roles in order to accomplish that which is necessary for the family’s survival.

At the same time that Maureen begins to cultivate her practical survival skills, she also starts reevaluating her old racial and social assumptions, to assess how well they hold up in the context of her recent experiences. For example, the passage in the novel describing Maureen’s childhood and her relationship to her family’s servant, Lydia, serves less to provide an example of generic “White herrenvolk attitudes and lifestyles” (as these are so well documented elsewhere in and out of the text that they can almost be

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15 July also clearly believes in patriarchal order, as he demonstrates in his authoritative relations with his wife and mother (81-84), but it is difficult to determine the sources of his beliefs; while they may simply be a product of his upbringing within a rural black patriarchy, like the kind headed by his tribal chief, it seems equally likely that he learned to accept and support certain other patriarchal values during his time among whites in the city. July’s standing within his village seems to derive strength from his frequent proximity to white centres of political and economic power – for example, as Bodenheimer has argued, “the possessive ‘his white people’ indicates a certain pride of status which the Smaleseas confer on him in the eyes of his village” (118) – so it is only natural that July would attempt to uphold the white values from which he often benefits. As he says to Maureen at one point, “we can only hope everything will come back all right” (95), which demonstrates his partial investment in and attachment to the white (patriarchal) order.
taken for granted by readers), than to show Maureen’s introspective reconsideration of the racial dynamic that existed between white girl and black housekeeper (30-33). In considering this passage about a *Life* coffee table book that features a photograph of Maureen and Lydia in which Lydia carries Maureen’s bag, it is once again essential to remember that *July’s People* is presented almost exclusively from Maureen’s perspective, especially when considering how this particular passage ends: “Why had Lydia carried her case? Did the photographer know what he saw, when they crossed the road like that, together? Did the book, placing the pair in its context, give the reason she and Lydia, in their affection and ignorance, didn’t know?” (33). Although Maureen does not seem to have answers to these fundamental questions, she at least “discovers the mutability and ethnocentricity of interpretations she had thought firmly fixed” (Greenstein 239). The fact that Maureen even ponders these problems demonstrates her willingness to confront her past, to re-imagine her childhood, and to ensure that the new role she struggles to find for herself in July’s society is informed by that past.

In a further manifestation of her character’s evolution, Maureen quickly discards the ideals of propriety and decorum that Bam still upholds, showing the ability to adapt her old values to her new surroundings. In order to work in the fields with the local women, for example, Maureen rolls up her jeans, revealing her “yellow bruises,” “purple-red ruptured blood-vessels of her thighs,” “blue varicose ropes,” and the “coarse hair of her calves,” even though this action means exposing herself to the laughter of July’s wife (92). In this passage, I believe that Maureen deliberately rejects the bourgeois principles of beauty and cosmetic perfection because she knows that the more immediate concepts of labour and harmonic social integration are now much more relevant in terms of her
lived experience. Maureen realizes that there is no reason she should “be ashamed to be seen in her weaknesses, her blemishes, as she saw the other woman’s” (92), since all are equals in the task of gathering food for their families. Thus, after sharing only a brief experience in the life of a rural black mother, Maureen begins to imagine that life for herself, and to evolve into the role in order to facilitate her family’s survival.

The most significant indicator of Maureen’s transformation after she arrives in July’s village, however, is seen in the three major confrontations she has with July, each of which merits individual consideration. The first argument begins over control of the bakkie, when Maureen tries to reclaim the vehicle keys. Although she initiates the conflict in an attempt to reassert her racial dominance over July (she deliberately sends for July, and insists he must report to an arena of her choice for the confrontation: 66-68), Maureen finds herself admitting the previously unacknowledged truth about their relationship: “You worked for me every day. I got on your nerves. So what. You got on mine. That’s how people are” (71). The illusions Maureen had about herself as a liberal, and as an employer of a black servant, are gone, and she finally sees that the exemplary relationship she believed she shared with July was fundamentally flawed. Ironically, July seems to have seen through these illusions all along, but was never empowered enough to point them out until after the revolution. Although the argument ends with even further tension accumulated between the two, it is interesting to observe Maureen’s rationalization of her treatment of July. Maureen’s defense of her behaviour “back there,” and her recognition that the argumentative victory she achieves over July burns “in her as a flame blackens within a hollow tree” (73), both point to the gradual
weakening of her sense of racial superiority and to her growing conception of a more egalitarian post-apartheid society.

This process of social and racial awakening in Maureen continues in the second conflict she experiences with July, when she again deliberately instigates an argument with her former servant. The conversation begins with Maureen mentioning news she has heard of further turmoil in the cities, and July indicating that he hopes everything will return to normal (95). When Maureen probes this statement, trying to establish what July means by engaging him in a more complex discussion than “the servant’s formula” (94) of conversation normally allows, Maureen is disappointed to discover that “he did not want to talk to her in any other way” (95). In other words, Maureen opens the discussion by trying to relate to July as an equal, but the black man immediately shuts her out. July then introduces what is perhaps the central problem of the novel – finding a role for oneself – when he tells Maureen that it is not her “place”\[^{16}\] to work in the fields with the black women, an assertion that Maureen vehemently rejects (97). The conflict continues, with relations deteriorating even further after Maureen alludes to her secret knowledge of July’s infidelity in Johannesburg. It is at this point, in spite of her provocation of July, that Maureen finally realizes how downtrodden July must feel in the world of whites:

> How was she to have known, until she came here, that the special consideration she had shown for his dignity as a man, while he was by definition a servant, would become his humiliation itself, the one thing to say between them that had any meaning.

\[^{16}\] As Maureen insightfully points out, “place” could be taken to mean either “role” or physical “territory” in this context (97). In either case, it is clear that July’s concept of “place” is determined by his patriarchal beliefs.
In this post-revolutionary world, where Maureen’s old “place” (in both senses of the word) is irretrievably destroyed, _July’s People_ is above all else an account of her search for a new place; the above argument with July serves to illustrate how Maureen is willing to find and occupy such new territory, and how she is even prepared to fight for her right to take on new roles. At the same time, however, it shows Maureen beginning to imagine how she has shamed July for so many years.\(^{17}\) Although Maureen still sees her past conduct as excusable, or understandable in the context of the circumstances (“how was she to have known?”), she has at least developed enough of an imagination to recognize the impact of her attitudes upon July’s psyche.

July’s insistence on reverting to old forms of language and interaction with Maureen in this argument, and his attempts to preserve the patriarchal, gender-based roles that he has always known in white society, give some interesting insight into his complex character. As I have already suggested, Bam’s continued espousal of patriarchal paradigms constitutes a form of unconscious racism, a perpetuation of apartheid’s hierarchical way of thinking. July, however, seems equally willing to uphold the white patriarchal system, in spite of his subordinate and “outsider” status within that order. Although one could make the argument that July’s beliefs about a woman’s “place” \(^{17}\) As July makes clear in his refusal to meet Maureen on a higher plane of conversation, however, he does not want to be “imagined” by Maureen, and is not interested in revealing more of his deceptively complex self to the white woman. This defensive tendency of July’s is noteworthy, since variations of it will be seen again in other black male characters later in this thesis.
simply reflect the typical patriarchal views of rural black men in South Africa, I think his values are more likely a product of his exposure to and appreciation for white culture; after all, July admits that “when he was in the company of [black] women, it was like being in the chief’s court” (21), and on several similar occasions readers get the sense that black women have a power in July’s society that he finds difficult to accept. Ultimately, July seems to want to replace white men at the head of their patriarchal society: he takes possession Bam’s truck (as if comfortably sliding into the seat of power only recently vacated by the white man), rejects the traditional black form of tribal government (122-123), and tries to impose the white patriarchal values he learned in the city on his wife and mother (81-84), and on Maureen (97). July, as readers finally realize in this second argument with Maureen, rejects the racist element of apartheid’s patriarchy but strives to keep all the other trappings of the white system; he does not want equality – he wants to enjoy the same kind of power the white man formerly enjoyed. Maureen’s gradual realization that July is simply trying to replace Bam at the top of her society’s patriarchy presumably leads her to the conclusion that she must free herself from both men in order to start anew.

The third conflict between July and Maureen actually signifies the climax of the novel, because it is at this point that Maureen’s imaginative evolution reaches its completion. When Maureen confronts July about the theft of Bam’s shotgun, she encounters the same, unchanging personality in her former servant: he is evasive, and refuses, not for lack of intelligence, to meet Maureen on any higher than the simplest plane of argumentation (149-151). At this point, Maureen finally realizes that there is no point in trying to preserve what she had thought was her special relationship with July:
“She was stampeded by a wild rush of need to destroy everything between them, she wanted to erase it beneath her heels as snails broke and slithered like the shell and slime of rotten eggs under her foot in the suburban garden” (152). Maureen’s subsequent accusations of theft incite July to finally lash out at her, unrestrained, “in his own language, his face flickering powerfully” (152). After July clearly establishes “that even communication, let aside understanding, is impossible between them” (Erritouni 75), Maureen gives up hope of reconciliation with July. It is as if, during this argument, Maureen finally realizes that she cannot build a new relationship with July from the foundations of her old one; instead, she and July mutually obliterate what remains of their shared past, creating the blank slate upon which a new future could conceivably (and slowly) be constructed. Maureen reaches an imaginative epiphany: “She understood, although she knew no word. Understood everything: what he had had to be, how she had covered up to herself for him, in order for him to be her idea of him” (152). For the first time, Maureen sees what it is like to be July, from July’s perspective, instead of from her own, and gives voice to this realization shortly thereafter, when she mumbles to Bam, “used to come to ask for everything. An aspirin. Can I use the telephone. Nothing in that house was his” (155). As Folks has insightfully argued, during the third confrontation, “Maureen is not only extending dignity to July but more importantly to herself, ‘trusting herself’ for the first time in her life” (123). It is only after this third conflict with July that Maureen truly understands the condition of dependency in which she kept the black man for fifteen years. Thus, one could argue that Maureen’s willingness to interrogate her “place” in the new world culminates in her developing the kind of imagination that whites will need in a post-apartheid South Africa – an
imagination that breeds tolerance through an understanding of the situation of “the other”.  

Regardless of how one chooses to interpret Maureen’s growth and change throughout July’s People (an interpretive task upon which I will embark momentarily), it would be difficult to dispute that her character evolves significantly from the self-deceiving, subordinated suburban housewife she is at the start of the novel, to something much more complex and self-aware at the narrative’s climax. Bam’s character is consistently “white faux liberal” through the majority of the novel, but Maureen begins adapting her paradigms almost immediately after arriving in July’s village, and freely divests herself of any old values that inhibit her survival and efforts to integrate into her new society. An understanding of this unique evolutionary tendency will prove essential to any reading of the novel’s much-debated denouement and conclusion.

V. “She Runs”: Maureen’s Escape from the Patriarchy

The open ending of July’s People leaves latitude for a variety of interpretations, most of which depend upon an assumption about the reason why Maureen runs away from her family and July’s village, toward the idling helicopter. Is Maureen giving up the struggle in her new world by consciously running toward her death? Is she hoping to be saved from the hardships of post-apartheid life by some form of white authority?

18 Although Gordimer’s essay “Living in the Interregnum” is primarily a statement of what whites need to do in order to facilitate transition in South Africa, July’s failure to interrogate his new place and his lack of imagination about “the other” in July’s People suggest that Gordimer also sees an obligation for blacks to learn empathy if racial harmony is to be achieved in the new South Africa. The author’s choice to confine her expression of this perspective to the more subtle realm of her fictional work is understandable, given the unwelcoming, often resentful attitude of many blacks toward white advocates of equality in the country.
Although there can be no certainty about the absolute truth of either of these possibilities, or of any others that could also be suggested, I will now attempt to analyse the development of Maureen’s character over the course of the narrative in order to suggest the most plausible interpretation of the novel’s conclusion.

All of the changes that take place in Maureen, it could be argued, result from her instinct to survive in the post-apartheid world that is July’s village. Since she knows that her old identity is of limited use in her quest for survival, Maureen strives to find new roles for herself that will allow her to contribute to and benefit from her new society. At the novel’s climax, however, Maureen comes to understand that even though she is prepared to renegotiate her relationships, she will meet with resistance from the adult community around her.¹⁹ For instance, she has already abandoned the hope of being respected by the black women: “Martha had laughed at veined white legs. At one time (the longings of a Maureen Smales from back there) it seemed a beginning. Something might have come of it. But not much” (146). She also knows that while she has adapted to her new circumstances, Bam has not, and their relationship now appears analogous to one of divorced people who only “meet on their regular day to keep up a semblance of family life” (140). Finally, Maureen realizes that no matter how much she might evolve, July will never see her as anything but the employer who subordinated him for fifteen years. Essentially, Maureen finds herself trapped in a situation where she knows she must change, but is not permitted to do so by those around her.

The novel’s final chapter begins in a distinctly optimistic tone, one that contrasts sharply with the general atmosphere of oppression that has faced the Smales family up to

¹⁹ Both the black and white children, in contrast, seem much more willing to accept one another as equals by the end of the novel, and to form non-racial relationships.
this point in the narrative. On the morning of the helicopter’s arrival, the air has a “vivid freshness” that “dispels” the foul smells normally permeating the village (156). The birds sing in “shrill joy,” and the narrative voice (perhaps Maureen’s) suggests, “on such a day, [one is] lucky to be alive,” without any trace of irony (157). Something significant has changed overnight, and the alteration in mood is firmly established before the first sign of the helicopter’s arrival; this fact suggests to me that Maureen begins the day with the intention of searching for her fresh start somewhere else, and that the helicopter does not serve as a catalyst for her escape from apartheid’s patriarchy. Maureen’s children have grown relatively self-sufficient among the blacks, and, if anything, they rely directly on July, not on their parents, for survival, so she feels no responsibility to remain in the environment that is clearly reluctant to accept her evolutionary social/racial metamorphosis. Maureen apparently recognizes that “the right to belong in South Africa seemingly requires that white women leave their white families in order to keep ‘moving on’” (Bazin 34). Thus, when Maureen runs toward the helicopter, “trusting herself with all the suppressed trust of a lifetime,” like animals who exist “only for their lone survival, the enemy of all that would make claims of responsibility” (159), one must conclude that she is running free of the patriarchy, away from the old structures that she now finds so oppressive, toward an uncertain future. I believe that readers are not intended to extrapolate from the text to speculate whether the helicopter bears “revolutionaries or

20 This suggestion is amplified by July’s provision of requested fishing line to Victor and Royce immediately before the helicopter arrives (157).
21 Although Maureen abandons her children, who represent at least part of the potential for racial harmony in South Africa, her actions enable both generations to approach the future from new perspectives, unencumbered by ways of the past; Maureen sets out to independently discover her place in the world, while her children seem to benefit and learn to accept the idea of a non-racial society as a result of their communal upbringing in July’s village.
white soldiers” (Erritouni 75), or whether Maureen ultimately lives or dies; instead, I think the significance of her running is that it demonstrates her unwillingness to accept the continued presence of apartheid’s legacy in a post-apartheid society, and her choice to abandon her flawed, known world in favour of an unknown one that might contain the hope of a more ideal, non-racial existence.

VI. Conclusion

At the close of July’s People, readers are indisputably aware of the distinction between Maureen’s and Bam’s individual responses to their fates in the weeks that follow the country’s revolution. Bam is static, in that he is unable to adapt himself to his new surroundings, and he continues, unsuccessfully, to apply his patriarchal paradigms to the problem of how he should live in July’s village. Maureen, however, continuously rethinks her place in society, and attempts to define new, more suitable roles for herself after the revolution. There is no conclusively “happy ending” in this novel, but there is hope; Maureen’s willingness to reflect on her old values, to engage in the discourse of post-apartheid role renegotiation, and to ultimately forsake a society that will not change with her, all indicate that individuals, regardless of their backgrounds, can break free from the oppressive legacy of racism in South Africa. This message endures in spite of the uncertain future that awaits Maureen, since the tone of optimism is not dependent upon her physical fate, but upon her already-complete psychological transformation.

This belief is echoed by Folks, who suggests that the novelist deliberately leaves the ending vague, in order to force readers to ponder the novel’s meaning for themselves: “whatever the helicopter literally brings, showing either plausible alternative would spoil the conclusion by distracting from the reader’s experiential ‘run through,’ an anxiety that the reader must then confront beyond the space of the novel itself” (125).
I will now return to the notion of Maureen and Bam as metonymic representatives of their “kinds,” of all South African white women and men of British origin. Gordimer leaves readers with the provocative and insightful suggestion that English-speaking white women must lead the transition through South Africa’s interregnum. The change in Maureen’s character seems to hinge upon her development of a more educated imagination, which ultimately allows her to see and feel what July’s life must have been like under the system of apartheid. It seems, however, that the potential to cultivate this empathy and racial tolerance exists predominantly in Maureen, not Bam. As a result of her subordinate role within the old white patriarchy, Maureen is positioned much closer to July to begin with: “Her own situation as a dependent woman and wife, her sexuality defined by her place in the ‘master bedroom en suite,’ gives her the intermediary status that allows her to see more than the white man” (Bodenheimer 116). As Greenstein has argued, the patriarchy of apartheid in South Africa limits the white woman as well as blacks, “defining her as property and condemning her to be both oppressor and ancillary victim” (231). In this sense, Maureen has, even at the outset of the novel, some appreciation for the dependency that July must feel as a servant in a nation ruled by whites.

Bam, in contrast, is so elevated within apartheid’s patriarchy that he has no sense of what it is live in humiliation, even after experiencing such a condition first-hand during his first weeks in July’s village; Bam fails to make the connection between his present misfortune and the equivalent circumstances in which he kept July for fifteen years. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Gordimer characterizes Maureen as the one capable of change in the post-apartheid world – Maureen’s gender simply puts her in
greater proximity to “the other,” and therefore in a more effective position to understand, to imagine, a more equitable, shared existence with blacks. Maureen demonstrates in *July’s People* that she is prepared to work South Africa’s land side-by-side with her countrymen in order to create this new era of equality, if not in July’s village then at some unknown destination that she seeks when fleeing toward the helicopter. Although the scale of Maureen’s actions is small, in that she changes within herself instead of changing her entire environment, they represent the first step in the building of a non-racial society – people must first alter their view of the world before they can take action to fix humanity’s larger problems. On a more universal plane, then, *July’s People* leaves readers with the impression that white women (in general), because of their intermediary status in South African society as both the racially empowered and sexually subordinated, and English-speaking white women (in particular), because of their more liberal cultural backgrounds, must initiate the individual (and subsequent social) changes that will be required to draw South Africa out of the interregnum, into a new, non-racial epoch.

I recognize that this metonymic interpretation of *July’s People* leaves many questions unanswered, particularly about July, and the role and fate of his “kind.” If, by extension of my argument, July metonymically represents all urban black workers (a huge demographic within South Africa), then might the novel also suggest some of the shortcomings in these people that need to be overcome? July clearly does not want to be “imagined” by Maureen or any other well-meaning white, nor does he seem to be willing to work toward an egalitarian future. Does Gordimer condemn or sanction such a stance? Is the kind of “educated imagination” that Maureen develops in *July’s People* something that needs to be reciprocated in order for South Africa to emerge from the interregnum?
Unfortunately for those who seek the Truths such as these within fiction, they are not likely to be found in *July’s People*; the questions that Gordimer leaves us with deliberately create, as Folks has argued, a sense of anxiety that forces us to continuously rethink our interpretations of the novel (125).
Chapter Three – Disgrace

I. Introduction

When she published July’s People in 1981, Nadine Gordimer, foreseeing the eventual transition of power from whites to blacks in her country, contrived a hypothetical, post-revolutionary scenario as the setting for her novel. J.M. Coetzee, in contrast, set Disgrace in the post-apartheid present when he published his novel in 1999. Ironically, the two works deal with the same dominant racial and social themes and problems, in spite of their respective origins during and after South Africa’s apartheid years: like July’s People, Disgrace is essentially an introspective narrative about the difficulties one individual faces in relating to others in a society that has undergone significant change. Informed as it is by the reality of continued racial, economic, and political difficulties in the years that followed the democratic election of a black majority government in South Africa, however, Coetzee’s novel arguably addresses the common themes in a more complex and compelling manner – the fiction he presents to readers is, after all, not a prediction of the future, but an artist’s convincing approximation of a disturbing present. As a result of the qualities of realism that permeate Coetzee’s narrative, readers (myself included) may be inclined to ponder more carefully the novel’s implications, and to assign more weight to any conclusions they derive from the author’s writing. Thus, for the purposes of this thesis, Disgrace represents an evolution, not simply a continuation, of the social/racial discourse taken up within the text of July’s People.

Although Disgrace is written primarily from the perspective of the male protagonist, David Lurie, this novel nonetheless also deals with the intersection of racial
and gender issues, mainly through the concurrent narration of Lucy Lurie’s story during the middle and later sections of the narrative. Gayatri Spivak suggests that the novel employs techniques of focalization and counterfocalization to draw alternating attention to David’s and Lucy’s points of view at different junctures in the narrative:

*Disgrace* is relentless in keeping the focalization confined to David Lurie. Indeed, this is the vehicle of the sympathetic portrayal of David Lurie. When Lucy is resolutely denied focalization, the reader is provoked, for he or she does not want to share in Lurie-the-chief-focalizer’s inability to ‘read’ Lucy as patient and agent. No reader is content with acting out the failure of reading. This is the signal for the active reader to counterfocalize. (22)

In other words, Lucy’s lack of voice in the text, the absence of narrative focalization through her, actually serves to direct astute readers to consider her plight and her motivations with a level of scrutiny equal to that otherwise reserved for the male protagonist. Thus, by elevating Lucy’s (secondary) story to the same plane as David’s (more central) story, Coetzee sets up an interesting juxtaposition of male and female perspectives that allows readers to gauge the effectiveness of each character’s paradigms for dealing with their individual traumas within a changing society.

Just as *July’s People* easily lends itself to a metonymic reading, wherein the actions of an individual character might be broadly representative of the actions of his or her “kind,” critics have also suggested that *Disgrace* can be interpreted in symbolic or allegorical ways. Gareth Cornwell, for instance, claims that Lucy’s silence in response to being raped encourages “an allegorical,” as opposed to a literal, “reading of her actions” (317); Mike Marais has argued that David Lurie’s “attempt to possess his student is
emblematic of the relationships of power that pervade South Africa as a whole (*Little Enough* 175); and Pamela Cooper suggests that, “at fifty-two, Lurie is broadly representative of an older social order: the officially defunct South Africa of Afrikaner dominance” (22). Although I share Cornwell’s sentiment, I believe the term “metonymic” is a more accurate descriptor than any of the terms “symbolic,” “emblematic,” or “allegorical” of such readings of *Disgrace*, since the characters in Coetzee’s novel are not abstractions designed to represent something other than themselves, but parts of demographic groups who can be said to represent the larger populations from which they are drawn. *Disgrace*, then, contrasts the white male and female ideologies of English-speaking South Africans, as metonymically presented in the characters of David and Lucy Lurie, in order to demonstrate the potential that lies within women like Lucy to adapt to a post-apartheid world, and the inability of men like David to make the kind of changes that will be necessary during and after the interregnum. Said otherwise, I will argue that David Lurie’s moral obsolescence and his reluctance to change in any meaningful way mark him as a typical male perpetuator of apartheid’s injustices, while Lucy Lurie’s efforts to attain compromise, self-sufficiency, and peace demonstrate how the English-speaking white woman in South Africa is more prepared to lead the transition toward a new social/racial dynamic.

II. The “Moral Dinosaur”: David Lurie and the White Male Ideology

The opening paragraph of *Disgrace* describes how David Lurie has “solved the problem of sex,” or found a release for his primal desires, by arranging for weekly encounters with a prostitute named Soraya (1); in light of this introduction to the
protagonist, it seems logical to begin a discussion about his outdated value system by examining the numerous ways in which he objectifies women. Soraya, for instance, is nothing more than a pet to David, a creature to be trained to pleasure him: “Not liking the stickiness of the makeup, he asked her to wipe it off. She obeyed, and has never worn it since. A ready learner, compliant, pliant” (5). Since David sees the prostitute only as a tool to serve his needs, a woman who must bend in servitude to him, he does not respect Soraya’s decision to break off their business relationship, and hunts her down like a “predator,” insisting on seeing her again (9-10). Even toward the end of the novel, after David has sought forgiveness from the Isaacs family for his harassment of Melanie, and after he has been humbled in very different ways by both a tribunal of his peers and a gang of black criminals, David’s perception of women does not fundamentally change: “That is what Soraya and the others were for: to suck the complex proteins out of his blood like snake-venom, leaving him clear-headed and dry” (185). In other words, David still believes that the women in his sexual life exist only to service his physiological needs, and he utterly fails to imagine how the women might have desires of their own, and raisons d’etre that extend beyond sleeping with him. Shortly after David makes this claim, he picks up another prostitute, one who is “younger even than Melanie” and incoherent from being “drunk or perhaps on drugs” (194). After satisfying his sexual whim (“why not, he thinks, on this night of revelations?”), David simply drives the mumbling girl back to the street corner where he found her (194-195), disposing of her with about as much humanity and concern as one envisages he would show toward a used prophylactic. Clearly, David’s tendencies to dehumanize women and to see them as commodities intended solely for his pleasure persist right through to the end of the novel.
David’s objectification of women, however, is not restricted to only those for whom he has sexual desire. When he arrives at Lucy’s homestead in the Eastern Cape, for example, the first thing David notices is that “she has put on weight. Her hips and breasts are now (he searches for the best word) ample” (59). David seems to believe that a woman’s value is measured primarily in terms of her aesthetic and physical appearance, so he naturally observes these aspects of his daughter’s character first. I would further suggest that David’s remarks, being specific to parts of the female anatomy frequently associated with childbirth (hips) and nursing (breasts), are simply another indication of his tendency to perceive and assess women as utilitarian objects, if not of sexuality, then of the consequence of sexual intercourse for women – motherhood. David’s recurrent propensity to evaluate his daughter’s appearance continues when, in the midst of a serious conversation with Lucy, his mind wanders: Lucy, he thinks, has “good bones, like her mother. A woman in the flower of her years, attractive despite the heaviness, despite the unflattering clothes […]. He nods absentmindedly. Attractive, he is thinking, yet lost to men” (76). Thus, even though David has no sexual interest in his daughter, he sees her female worth as reduced by the fact that she is not desirable to other men (and that she does not desire men), since this means that her potential as a woman is wasted. David again articulates his beliefs about the obligation women have to look good in front of men when he meets, and is initially repulsed by, Bev Shaw, the “dumpy” little woman who runs the animal clinic: “He does not like women who make no effort to be attractive” (72). David’s opinions are clear here: women have a cosmetic duty to present and package themselves in ways that are appealing to men – he sees women almost exclusively as objects of aesthetic worth, intended for male appreciation.
The most telling indication of David’s objectification of women, however, can be seen in his treatment of Melanie Isaacs, and in his response to accusations that stem from his inappropriate relationship with the girl. After first propositioning his young student, for instance, David then counters her intention to leave by telling her, “a woman’s beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it” (16). This statement summarizes Lurie’s belief that women have an overriding obligation to please men, one that takes precedence over any individual desires. When, after later having forced himself upon Melanie several times, Lurie is exposed and questioned by a reporter about whether or not he is sorry for his misdeeds, the professor replies in the negative: “‘No’ he says, ‘I was enriched by the experience’” (56). The implication of Lurie’s response is that he is not remotely concerned with how Melanie, the university, or anyone else has been affected by his abuse of authority – it is sufficient for him that he has gained some pleasure from the encounter. Although Lurie likes to think of his love life in artistic and poetic terms (“I became a servant of Eros” – 52), his lack of consideration for the others who are touched (literally and figuratively) by his actions marks him as nothing more than a selfish hedonist. In a later vindication of his behaviour to Lucy, David claims that his “case rests on the rights of desire” (89 – my emphasis), suggesting that, regardless of what Melanie wanted or what society expected of him, he feels he was legitimately entitled to take advantage of the girl, the object of his desire. As he demonstrates in his treatment of Melanie, David obviously struggles to see women as anything more than resources to be consumed (and promptly discarded).

Although David Lurie’s explicit opinions about blacks and the concept of social equality are scarce in the text, I believe some important inferences can be drawn from his
attitudes about women that will demonstrate how he represents an obstacle to the
transition toward an improved post-apartheid racial dynamic. Notwithstanding the
original rationalizations for South Africa’s apartheid policies, one could easily argue that
the fundamental purpose of apartheid was to subjugate the country’s poorer non-white
population, thereby creating an uneducated, disenfranchised, and cheap labour market for
the wealthy whites to economically and politically exploit. Furthermore, although South
Africa’s original Afrikaner settlers took some advantage of the native labour force, and
“though the Afrikaners acquired the notoriety, it was the British who first broke black
power, crushing the tribes in war, annexing their territory, and eroding their institutions
with Christianization, education, and finally industrialization and urbanization” (Sparks
46). In other words, the white government that supported apartheid, and the British
colonizers who laid the foundation for such economic exploitation, “objectified” the
country’s entire black and coloured populations, by envisioning the disempowered
peoples as just another resource from which whites could profit. Apart from simply
being a “womanizer” (7), David Lurie, as Isidore Diala has argued, is “deeply entrenched
still in colonial conceptions of ‘The Dark Continent’ and staunch in his delusions of his
racial superiority” (59); although Diala does not support her assertion with citations from
the text, she is perhaps referring to Lurie’s tendency to describe his surroundings as
“darkest Africa” (95) and “old Kaffraria” (122), and to his apparent longing for “the old
days” of apartheid, during which “one could have had it out with Petrus […] to the extent
of losing one’s temper and sending him packing” (116). In this respect, the greed and
indulgence that David displays in his objectification of women in Disgrace is also hinted
at (albeit much less overtly) in his opinions about black-white racial relations. In any
case, his personal beliefs in such matters often recall the kind of British colonial attitudes that preceded apartheid’s “objectifying” policies in South Africa, and mark him as an old-fashioned impediment to the emergence of a more harmonious non-racial order in the country.

If apartheid drew its origins from the objectification of disempowered peoples, it was perpetuated for so many years by the stubborn unwillingness of the empowered whites to entertain any possibility of change. In continuing to think of David Lurie as a metonymic representative of the English-speaking white male South African, then, it is not surprising that he frequently vocalizes a reluctance to adapt his personal values and beliefs to better suit the changing times. In Disgrace’s opening chapter, for example, Lurie declares that “his temperament is not going to change. He is too old for that. His temperament is fixed, set” (2). Later, when defending himself to the university’s disciplinary tribunal, Lurie asserts, “I am a grown man. I am not receptive to being counselled. I am beyond the reach of counselling” (49). After meeting and passing judgment on the unattractive Bev Shaw, he considers that “his mind has become a refuge for old thoughts, idle, indigent, with nowhere else to go. He ought to chase them out, sweep the premises clean. But he does not care to do so, or does not care enough” (72).23

I would contend that, as a clearly intelligent and introspective individual, David Lurie does not lack the youth or mental capacity necessary to change his ways, as he suggests in the above examples; instead, it seems that Lurie is simply caught up in a kind of self-

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23 Lurie’s apathetic attitude in this example represents what may be a typical stance by South Africans of British origin. Sparks argues that the English tolerated apartheid simply because they were “paralysed politically by their own historic conservatism. […] They have dithered ineffectually in the middle” of the struggle for power between blacks and whites in the country throughout history (48).
righteous inertia, which I consider closely analogous to the mindsets of both the white Afrikaner males who made up the country’s government and actively enforced apartheid policies through the last half of the twentieth century, and the English-speaking white males who passively absolved themselves of any political responsibilities\textsuperscript{24} – although there was/is pressure on these groups to transform, the force of it was/is not strong enough to initiate action and precipitate change.

A careful observer, however, might point out that the examples upon which the above analogy is based are all taken from the earlier parts of Coetzee’s novel, so they fail to account for any development that might take place in Lurie’s character as the narrative progresses, as he comes to “understand” and “love” downtrodden others, such as the dogs at the clinic, or the Teresa of Lurie’s opera. When David empathizes with the sheep intended for slaughter at Petrus’s party, for example, the professor begins to question the fixed nature of his temperament: “Do I have to change, he thinks? Do I have to become like Bev Shaw?” (126). Days later, when the opera he is composing starts to centre on Teresa more than Byron, Lurie again wonders if he is capable of adapting: “Can he find it in his heart to love this plain, ordinary woman? Can he love her enough to write music for her? If he cannot, what is left for him?” (182). Although each of these examples reflects Lurie’s self-inquisitiveness about his ability to change, and therefore might lend credibility to a theory about David’s potential for character transformation, neither gives

\textsuperscript{24} I recognize that many white women, particularly Afrikaners, also contributed to the perpetuation and sustainment of apartheid policies in South Africa (examples of which can be seen in \textit{A Blade of Grass}, as I will discuss in Chapter Three), predominantly through their domestic, quotidian dealings with blacks. However, given the patriarchal structure of the Afrikaner government and society, I attribute the major force of apartheid’s persistence in South Africa to the white male gender.
decisive evidence about whether or not the grown man can actually modify his values and behaviour.

There is, however, further support for the idea that Lurie cannot and will not change his ways in the novel’s second to last chapter, when, after beating the young black boy, Pollux, Lurie thinks to himself, “you must change your life. Well, he is too old to heed, too old to change. Lucy may be able to bend to the tempest; he cannot, not with honour” (209). Thus, in spite of the relatively insignificant shifts in his outlook toward animals and a quasi-fictional character in his opera, David Lurie demonstrates a consistent, and persistent, unwillingness to change his old-fashioned value system in any substantial way. He reflects the self-righteous, unaccommodating kind of attitude that perpetuated apartheid in South Africa, and therefore stands in opposition to the more progressive movement (that I will later argue is represented in Lucy’s character) toward a non-racial society.

If Lurie’s objectification of women in Disgrace represents the white male origins of apartheid, and his reluctance to change can be equated to the attitudes that maintained policies of apartheid over the years, then his knowingly immoral behaviour at different points in the narrative can be logically associated with apartheid’s final twilight years – the period when the rest of the Western world attempted to point out the illegitimacy of South Africa’s laws (through diplomacy and economic sanctions), but during which racism and discrimination were nonetheless willfully championed by the National Party government. Lurie’s relationship with Melanie Isaacs provides a prime example of this.

25 As Grant Farred has pointed out, apartheid could not be called “illegal” since the policies carried the force of national law; however, in the eyes of the world, the policies violated the fundamental human rights of black and coloured South Africans, and were thus “illegitimate” and “ideologically intolerable” (590).
phenomenon of conscious immorality, as the professor is acutely aware of his unethical conduct from the moment he first invites the young girl into his house. When trying to convince himself that there is “nothing wrong with rituals” like the courtship of a woman by a man, Lurie immediately recognizes the aggravating factor in his particular case: “But the girl he has brought home is not just thirty years his junior: she is a student, his student, under his tutelage” (12). Lurie’s awareness of the unique nature of his relationship to his female students is alluded to earlier on the same page, when he refers to them as “his charges,” a significant word choice since it implies a formal responsibility for the well-being of the students, one that he promptly disregards. At various later stages of their liaison, David admits all of the following to himself: Melanie is “too young […] He ought to let her go” (18); she is “a child! he thinks: No more than a child! What am I doing?” (20); and, “he ought to be gone too. An unseemly business, sitting in the dark, spying on a girl (unbidden the word letching comes to him)” (24). In each case, David displays both a full cognizance of the wrongness of his actions, and a simultaneous willingness to disregard the voice of his conscience in order to continue with his immoral behaviour – he is, as one critic has asserted, “never the portrait of morality” in the narrative (Segall 41). As Marais has insightfully pointed out, Lurie “conceives of himself as an individual who is free to realize his every desire, even if this means violating the rights of other individuals” (Task of the Imagination 76). I believe

26 Among other more obvious connotations of the word, for example, “charge” in a naval sense refers to the ultimate and inescapable legal “responsibility vested in a Commanding Officer for the proper and safe movements and operations of a ship and her company” (Canadian Maritime Command Order 4-15). Nothing can absolve an officer who has charge of a ship of this responsibility, and severe sanctions are administered to those who fail to exercise it with due diligence. (Given the outcome of Lurie’s tribunal, an understanding of this context of the word seems appropriate).
the parallels between David’s conduct and that of Afrikaner and English-speaking South Africans during the 1980s and early 1990s, both of which seem to reflect an “I know this is wrong but I am going to allow it to happen anyway” attitude,\(^\text{27}\) are clearly, if not deliberately, established by Coetzee, and demonstrate the barrier that white male South Africans like Lurie present to the development of a more egalitarian post-apartheid society.

The above discussion provides documentation of how David Lurie is portrayed by Coetzee as “a moral dinosaur” (89), but I now propose to examine why Lurie espouses such outdated values, in order to gain insight into the underlying mechanisms responsible for his moral obsolescence. If there is one overarching quality that distinguishes David’s weltanschauung from Lucy’s in Disgrace, I believe it is the father’s recurrent faith in, and reliance upon, various principles and theories throughout the narrative; unlike Lucy, who frequently refuses to be guided by abstract concepts, David seems to base his actions upon precepts that are often problematic for him when applied to reality. In the novel’s opening chapter, for instance, Lurie explains his “rule” for dealing with sexual partners – “follow your temperament” (2) – but as readers quickly discover, this rule creates the indulgent permissiveness that justifies to (only) Lurie his exploitation of Melanie Isaacs, and ultimately leads the professor into the beginning of his state of “disgrace.” In another example, after being set on fire by the black intruders at Lucy’s house, David talks himself through the following explanation of his misfortune:

\(^{27}\) Although I cannot say with certainty that the governments in South Africa during the 80s and 90s knew that it was wrong to continue upholding apartheid laws, there was definitely enough international pressure, in the form of trade sanctions and diplomatic lobbying, to give them an indication that the rest of the world felt it was wrong.
Too many people, too few things. What there is must go into circulation, so that everyone can have a chance to be happy for a day. That is the theory; hold to the theory and to the comforts of theory. Not human evil, just a vast circulatory system, to whose workings pity and terror are irrelevant. That is how one must see life in this country: in its schematic aspect. (98)

David’s “theory” is incorrect, a fact that is made evident by Lucy’s recollection of the “personal hatred” with which she was raped by her attackers (156). Lucy’s revelation makes it clear that the Luries are not victimized by the kind of economic “invisible hand” referred to by Adam Smith in The Wealth of Nations, or simply as part of the “great campaign of redistribution” mentioned by David later in the novel (176); rather, David and Lucy are assaulted by actual people, people who deliberately showcase their “human evil” in order to inspire “terror” in their victims, and who, with “history speaking through them” (156), attempt to gain retribution for wrongs of the past. The historical irony is that there were not too many people and too few things to make everyone happy for a day in South Africa – there was just a minority of people who wanted more than their equal share of things (in yet another example of human evil at work), a phenomenon that readers are presumably expected to believe has created the hatred displayed by the attackers. These flawed principles demonstrate David’s tendency to dwell in abstract and theoretical worlds, which appears to be the source of his moral obsolescence: David fails to observe his external environment closely enough to realize that it does not conform to, and will not tolerate, his rules and theories. Lurie is, as his ex-wife points out, “a great self-deceiver” in this respect (188), and one cannot help but associate his problematic
principles with the grossly unjust rationalizations of apartheid that were provided, over so many years, by successive governments in South Africa.

Ultimately, Lurie is presented in *Disgrace* as a “fixed,” morally obsolete character within an extremely dynamic environment. In a society that sees individuals like Lucy and Petrus actively reevaluating and renegotiating their relationships with one another, David remains unchanged, clinging to his theories and the apartheid-era ideals he brought with him into the post-apartheid world. I believe the link between David’s out-dated value system and his fate in *Disgrace* are not coincidental, and that readers are intended to relate the perpetual discord, the absence of fulfillment, and the “disgrace” that Lurie finds in his life to the professor’s stubborn unwillingness to adapt to the realities of a new South Africa. In this respect, Lurie serves as a metonymic indication of the impediment to social progress that white male South Africans (both English and Afrikaner) can often represent. Furthermore, the relentless narrative focalization through David Lurie in passages such as those cited above prepares the way for subsequent (and concurrent) counterfocalization through Lucy Lurie as the alternative paradigms she represents are introduced to Coetzee’s readers.

III. “Bend[ing] to the Tempest”: Lucy and the White Female Ideology

While David Lurie tends to think and work in abstractions (as seen in his various articulations of principles, and in his composition of an opera), Lucy Lurie, when she is introduced in the second quarter of *Disgrace*, is immediately presented as being firmly grounded in the concrete world – this immediate contrast provides active readers with the cue they need to begin counterfocalizing. Lucy is described as “comfortably barefoot”
when she greets David for the first time in the novel, an image that evokes a sense of connection between Lucy and the earth that her father clearly lacks (59), and one that is reiterated a few pages later, when “Lucy’s bare toes grip the red earth” as if she is rooted in the soil. Perceived as somewhat of a generational “throwback” by her father, Lucy is later described as a “sturdy young settler” whose fingernails are grimy with “honourable” country dirt (61), and who David seems to admire as “a frontier farmer of the new breed” (62). I would suggest that Lucy’s connection to the land, as seen in these examples, signifies her willingness to act within, and not just to contemplate the possibility of, a new South Africa. That is to say, being concerned more with the concrete than the abstract, Lucy embodies the kind of agency that the nation needs from its general population in order to complete its transition from interregnum to post-apartheid steady state. This introduction to Lucy, and to the earthy place she inhabits, contrasts sharply with the urban, intellectual place that David occupies throughout the first fifty pages of the novel, and provides readers with the background they will need to appreciate Lucy’s character as more is gradually revealed about her in the chapters that follow.

Although Lucy seldom gives voice to the values that influence her behaviour, certain details and statements within the text provide insight into the ideals that seem to govern how she conducts herself. For instance, Lucy initially moves to her Eastern Cape farm “as a member of a commune” (60), which implies that she espouses the concepts of equality and cooperation that form the philosophical foundations of communal living, and that she may reject formal notions of individual ownership and property. Although the reference to Lucy’s involvement with a commune is only made in passing, I would

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28 Again, I use the term “place” to signify both a physical location and a frame of mind.
suggest that this piece of information foreshadows (and helps to explain) many of her actions after she is raped, such as her concession of most of her farm to Petrus (205). In any case, her experience within a commune certainly indicates her preparedness to do that which Nadine Gordimer considers necessary of all white South Africans if the country is ever to emerge from the interregnum: Lucy is willing to “opt out of class and race privilege” (The Essential Gesture 270), by renouncing the capitalist paradigms from which her wealth and privilege is originally derived.

After purchasing the farm for herself, however, Lucy begins to exemplify a kind of independence and self-sufficiency that might be the model for whites in a post-apartheid South Africa. She grows her own winter vegetables, collects and pumps her own rainwater, and earns money by selling flowers and boarding dogs. Although she is assisted in her labours by Petrus, a black man, she confers upon him the status of “co-proprietor” (62), and shares her land with him in their cooperative venture. David even comments on Lucy’s break from his patriarchal authority, observing, “the dogs, the gardening, the astrology books, the asexual clothes: in each he recognizes a statement of independence, considered, purposeful. The turn away from men too. Making her own life. Coming out of his shadow” (89). In this respect, Lucy’s simple, independent existence represents the success of a new socio-economic paradigm for whites. Although Coetzee is clearly not suggesting that South African whites should abandon their businesses and become subsistence farmers, Lucy’s example optimistically demonstrates

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29 Although the title of Gordimer’s collection of essays refers to the ethical obligation of white writers in South Africa, the renunciation of privilege she describes in the above excerpt may be another, more universal, suggestion of the “essential gestures” of good faith needed from whites in the country.
how an adequate living can be made from the country’s land and other resources without the need to exploit the black labour force.

Lucy’s pragmatic ideology is further revealed in a discussion she later has with her father about animals, and her country ways of living. She confronts David about his expectations for her, with the accusation, “you think I ought to be painting still lives or teaching myself Russian. You don’t approve of friends like Bev and Bill Shaw because they are not going to lead me to a higher life.” When David tries to deny this claim, Lucy further articulates her argument:

But it is true. They are not going to lead me to a higher life, and the reason is, there is no higher life. This is the only life there is. Which we share with animals. That’s the example that people like Bev try to set. That’s the example I try to follow. To share some of our human privilege with the beasts. (74)

In an effort to make peace with Lucy, David replies in partial agreement:

As for animals, by all means let us be kind to them. But let us not lose perspective. We are of a different order of creation from the animals. Not higher, necessarily, just different. So if we are going to be kind, let it be out of simple generosity, not because we feel guilty or fear retribution. (74)

I believe that Coetzee uses this argument between David and Lucy for two purposes: first, to juxtapose the different ways in which the father and daughter believe they should interact with the “others” who share their environment, and second, to explicitly establish Lucy’s belief in action rather than contemplation, and in a concrete rather than an abstract world.
The first point is important because, as readers later find out, the different philosophies that Lucy and David have about animals seem to extend to non-white humans as well: Lucy is prepared to “share” her farm with Petrus, while David continues to see himself as occupying an order of creation that is both different and higher than that inhabited by blacks. Although Lucy never addresses David’s claim that man occupies a different order of creation from animals, probably for fear of strengthening David’s already powerful sense of (white) human privilege, she at least extends some generosity to “the others,” both man and animal, in her life. However, the generosity that David, in the above passage, suggests should motivate kindness never materializes in his dealings with blacks, as he comes to dislike and distrust Petrus increasingly as the narrative progresses; David’s distrust of Petrus is understandable given the ambiguous role Petrus plays in facilitating (by being absent) violent crimes on Lucy’s farm, but his dislike of the black man seems much more intrinsic, rooted in apparently irreconcilable racial differences: “He detests him. Talking to Petrus is like punching a bag filled with sand” (152). This fact illuminates a flaw in the professor’s argument that seriously detracts from its credibility – perhaps, as Lucy implies through her unheeded voice and her noteworthy silences (and as most morally conscious readers would agree), whites must share what they have with others because it is right, not because they are generous.

The second point is taken up again by Coetzee later in the novel, after David and Lucy are attacked, when it becomes clear that Lucy’s active life prepares her much better

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30 In this argument, as in many other instances, Lucy’s silence serves as the site of further narrative counterfocalization.
31 As the last lines of the novel ironically suggest, David does, however, finally cultivate a sense of kindness and generosity toward animals (220), in spite of the consistent absence of these qualities in his interactions with Petrus and other blacks.
for survival in the new South Africa than David’s contemplative mode of existence. When David is locked in the bathroom by the black intruders, for example, he realizes that “he speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa” (95), just as painting still lives or learning Russian will not help Lucy avoid being raped. The reality is that neither Lucy nor David can prevent the crimes that befall them. However, their immediate responses to the attacks give clear indications of who is better able to navigate the obstacles that lie before them in their shared post-apartheid world: “She is all strength, all purposefulness, whereas the trembling seems to have spread to his whole body” (101); “he is weak as a baby, and lightheaded too” (103), while she tends to him several times as if he were the child and she the parent (103-104).

While David’s and Lucy’s differing perspectives are introduced and developed earlier in the novel, it is only after the attack that Coetzee seems to make a value judgment about the utility of their respective outlooks: Lucy’s belief in action allows her to take the necessary steps to ensure both of their survivals, while David’s contemplative tendencies leave him helpless in the time that immediately follows their traumas. Clearly, in this case, the white woman is better positioned to adapt to the harsh realities of the new South Africa than the white man.

Lucy’s more long-term reaction to being raped, however, is perhaps an even better indication of her preparedness to evolve in order to meet the demands of her post-apartheid world. Lucy behaves in ways that David, and probably a good number of readers, find problematic and impossible to understand, in large part because she is most strongly denied narrative focalization by Coetzee after she is raped – readers, like David, are simply left to guess at Lucy’s almost unexplained motives for keeping silent about the
crime, and for deciding not to abort her pregnancy. I believe, however, that her actions can be explained in terms of environmentally-induced behavioural adaptations, and her overpowering desire to create a peaceful, stable local environment, in spite of the legacy of conflict that years of apartheid have left behind.

First, let us consider Lucy’s refusal to deal in abstractions and vague principles. This trend, already described above, continues after she is raped, and is stressed in almost each of her arguments with her father: “It was never safe, and it’s not an idea, good or bad. I’m not going back for the sake of an idea. I’m just going back” (105); “guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don’t act in terms of abstractions. Until you make an effort to see that, I can’t help you” (112); and, “with regard to the police, let me remind you why we called them in the first place: for the sake of the insurance” (134). Although initially confusing, Lucy’s rejection of abstractions is perhaps easier to understand after considering how Petrus operates. In a long discussion with David about the attack, for example, Petrus also demonstrates a refusal to argue on the plane of principles: it does not matter to him that David’s car was stolen, since the insurance will pay for a new one; it is not important whether the boy, Pollux, is guilty or not, since he cannot go to jail in either case; and, it is irrelevant that Lucy was raped in the past, since Petrus is now willing to guarantee her protection (137-139). In a later example, Petrus again shows his tendency to become absorbed in practical details, such as, “how I must go to the market if I do not have the kombi?” (152-153), when David asks him to manage the farm on Lucy’s behalf. In each case, Petrus demonstrates a fixation on concrete, tangible elements of the discussion, and is not lured into David’s domain of philosophy and principle – in this regard, Petrus represents a more sly, sophisticated version of
Gordimer’s July: both black men refuse to engage in rhetoric with their white neighbours, and use the simplistic English that generations of white South Africans have come to expect of blacks as defensive weapons of their own.\(^\text{32}\) Thus, if Lucy is unwilling to deal in abstract terms, it is likely because this is a mode of thought that is foreign to and/or not employed by those around her, the citizens of the new South Africa: “Lucy’s denial of such abstractions is an assertion, instead, of her pragmatic approach to living in the new South Africa and of the price of sharing the land” (Kossew 160). In other words, Lucy has adapted her manner of thinking to suit the practical demands of her self-sufficient, post-apartheid way of life.

Above all, however, Lucy displays a commitment to the maintenance of peace in her environment, and this quality is likely the motivator for all her conciliatory behaviour after she is raped. In a rare example of narrative focalization through Lucy instead of her father, Lucy finally voices her one major desire (after David has beat up on Pollux):

“Everything had settled down, everything was peaceful again, until you came back. I must have peace around me. I am prepared to do anything, make any sacrifice, for the sake of peace” (208). Once readers finally realize this about Lucy, once her voice finally comes through in the text, her unwillingness to press rape charges against her attackers, her refusal to leave the farm, and her decision not to abort her pregnancy all make sense:

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\(^{32}\) Presumably for fear of projecting non-authentic consciousnesses into their narratives, Coetzee and Gordimer both refuse to allow their readers full access to the internal motivations and desires of their black characters. Gordimer discusses some of the difficulties of creating black characters in “Living in the Interregnum” (279), and it is reasonable to expect that Coetzee faces many of the same authorial pressures. Consequently, readers are left to speculate whether Petrus is scheming and vengeful, ambitiously complacent, or simply ignorant of the crimes that take place on the farm, and whether July truly seeks to replace his white employers in the upper echelon of an emerging new society, or if he is just struggling to do the right thing in a complex environment.
Lucy will make peace in her little part of the world, even if it means starting over “with nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing” (205). It is important to note that Lucy does not aspire to world peace, or even national peace, as these would simply be seen by her as additional abstractions; instead she seeks only peace around her, within the sphere of her influence, since this is a local concept that she believes can actually be achieved through her action, and one that might improve her life once attained. Lucy’s desire for, and efforts toward establishing this peace mark her as a leader in the movement toward a new, non-racial South Africa.

Lucy Lurie’s paradigm in Disgrace, when contrasted with her father’s ideology, is ultimately presented as being far more open to the possibilities of change and peace, arguably the two most important prerequisites for the eventual establishment of a stable post-apartheid environment in South Africa. Lucy, through her self-sufficient ties to the earth, her capacity to work toward communal goals, her ability to empathize with “others,” and her willingness to attain peace through action instead of contemplation, stands as a metonymic model of the unique potential that exists within English-speaking white South African women to accept the demands that an equitable post-apartheid society will make upon them.

IV. Conclusion

Looking at the juxtaposition between David’s and Lucy’s respective ideologies (the former strongly asserted throughout the text, the latter only revealed through Coetzee’s provocation of his readers into acts of counterfocalization), I believe that a statement can be made about the kind of characters that will hinder or facilitate transition
in South Africa. David is obsolete, knows this, and is still not willing to change the way he sees the world. As a result, he loses his job, estranges himself from his daughter (for at least the better part of the novel, and perhaps forever), escalates racial tensions between Lucy and her neighbours, and dedicates himself predominantly to the composition of an opera that he knows will never assist him in returning “triumphant to society” (214). One might argue that David’s artistic creation represents an essential aesthetic contribution to a society in need of rebuilding – Gordimer herself makes a similar argument when she appeals to her fellow writers to continue developing their national literature after the fall of apartheid, claiming that South African fiction used to play “the immeasurably valuable part of articulating the people’s political struggle,” but that it never “enriched their lives with a literary culture” (*Turning the Page* 7). Perhaps David, in the composition of his opera, is attempting to help reconstruct and enrich South African society in the only way he knows how – through art. It seems more likely, however, that David absorbs himself in his work for purely personal reasons, as if trying to come to terms with elements of his own existence by voicing them through his opera; after all, both he and the Teresa of his creation are aging, lonely, and saddened by the lost excitement of their youth. In this sense, David’s fixation on the Byron-Teresa opera simply represents another of his selfish obsessions, a further withdrawal on David’s part from the society that, in order to succeed in being reconstructed, so desperately needs engagement from intellectuals such as himself.

Lucy, in contrast, works with animals and blacks in an effort to ensure all inhabitants of her environment are treated with the respect and dignity due unto them. She is prepared to change, to pay a price for “staying on” (158) as a white in South
Africa, while David still resists giving up the privilege that his race has brought him for so many years. In “Living in the Interregnum,” Gordimer recounts how a black friend of hers once told her that “Whites have to learn to struggle” if the country’s racial problems are to be resolved (270); Lucy’s readiness to make sacrifices in Disgrace, regardless of the outcome of the novel, indicate to me that she is better positioned than her father to “struggle,” and to usher into South Africa a new non-racial era.

That is not to say that Lucy’s ideology represents an ideal solution to the problem of racial discord that exists in South Africa – one would certainly find it difficult to advance an argument that white women in the country must suffer being raped as the cost of apartheid’s past injustices. The economic and emotional concessions Lucy makes in order to precipitate peace around her, after all, are enormous, and yet there is still no guarantee that she will ever find the stability and harmony that she seeks, even under the shelter of protection that Petrus offers her. Kossew recognizes that Disgrace’s conclusion is complicated and non-committal, calling Lucy’s actions both “morally ambiguous” and “an ambivalent message of hope and defeat” (160), while Diala claims that “if Lucy’s mode of engagement with history is Coetzee’s valid paradigm for whites’ negotiation for a precarious foothold in post-apartheid South Africa, then his conception of their fall from grace evokes near absolute depravity” (60). In spite of David Lurie’s questionable moral standpoint, readers are surely inclined, at least in part, to agree with his assessment of Lucy’s situation as “ridiculous, sinister” (200), and “not workable” (204).

The fact of the matter, however, is that Lucy demonstrates, through her actions, that she is inclined to change with the times. While, as the above critics point out, there is substantial risk and uncertainty inherent in Lucy’s approach to life in the new South
Africa, it at least represents a step away from the white male paradigms (like David’s) that history has proven (through years of uprisings, insurgencies, and international condemnation) to be definitively unworkable. If one accepts that which has been seen over the last fifteen years – that South Africa cannot instantaneously transform itself from violent and conflict-ridden apartheid state to peaceful, egalitarian post-apartheid nation – then Lucy’s complex philosophy about her place in the country seems realistic; massive social transition is not something that can be achieved in a single step, but something that people “struggle” through over time. In this sense, it is not overly important that the individual choices Lucy makes might lead to further hardship for her; she is fallible, and recognizes as much when she admits to her father, “the road I am following may be the wrong one. But if I leave the farm now I will be defeated, and will taste that defeat for the rest of my life” (161). The more significant consideration is that Lucy has the courage to “bend to the tempest” (209), while David needs his daughter to remind him that he “shouldn’t be so unbending,” since “it isn’t heroic to be unbending” (66). At the end of the novel, Lucy ultimately proves about women that which is repeated in the narrative several times: “Women can be surprisingly forgiving” (69), and “women are adaptable. Lucy is adaptable” (210). As Ute Kauer accurately summarizes, “the superior understanding of social processes” in Disgrace “seems to be female” (110), and it is almost exclusively through Lucy’s character that Coetzee establishes this superior female insight.

When asked by her father if she loves her unborn child yet, Lucy replies, “No. How could I? But I will. Love will grow – one can trust Mother Nature for that. I am determined to be a good mother, David. A good mother and a good person” (216).
believe this statement captures the essence of Lucy’s way of thinking, and explains, in simple terms, her actions (that rarely capture direct focalization) throughout the narrative: by opening herself up to changes that the future may require of her, and to the inevitable challenges that “mother nature” brings to her (motherhood) and to South Africa (the establishment of an equitable, non-racial society), Lucy demonstrates the female potential to lead change that David so obviously lacks. Perhaps Coetzee presents Lucy’s paradigm in this manner in order to demonstrate that (after so much violence and injustice) racial harmony in South Africa, like a mother’s love for a hybrid child conceived through rape, might grow of its own accord, if individuals make the choice, as Lucy has, to live “good” lives. One thing, however, is certain in Disgrace: Lucy possesses the potential to facilitate social and racial transition, while David can only stand in the way of the changes that are needed in order to bring a constructive end to South Africa’s interregnum.
Chapter Four – A Blade of Grass

I. Introduction

Published in 2003, A Blade of Grass is written by Lewis DeSoto, a Canadian who was born in Bloemfontein, South Africa, and whose family emigrated to Canada when he was still a boy. Like July’s People, DeSoto’s novel is set in rural South Africa during the conflict-ridden times that mark the end of apartheid; although no dates are provided in the text, reviewers have generally assumed that the events in the narrative take place sometime in the 1970s. Unlike July’s People, however, A Blade of Grass is written not about a predicted or possible future, but about an era through which South Africa had already passed. As a result of this informed authorial hindsight, DeSoto’s novel brings to his readers a remarkable sense of authenticity as it addresses social and racial issues that remain highly relevant within contemporary South African society.

Although Disgrace also speaks to some of the problems inherent in post-apartheid South Africa, Coetzee’s novel treats the question of race somewhat peripherally, as one of the many areas within the narrative that helps to highlight the self-absorbed David Lurie’s underdeveloped sense of morality. In A Blade of Grass, however, the idea of race occupies a permanent foreground within the text: the black-white relationship that grows between Märit and Tembi dominates the narrative, and is the locus around which all other action centres. In this respect, by combining the author’s post-apartheid perspective (similar to Coetzee’s in Disgrace) with the novel’s setting of impending revolution and its direct concentration on black-white racial relations (reminiscent of July’s People), A Blade of Grass represents a kind of climax in the racial discourse of anti-apartheid novels discussed in this thesis.
A metonymic reading of *A Blade of Grass* proves rather complicated, since the white protagonist, Märit, is clearly not representative of her kind. The white, predominantly Afrikaner, farm wives to whom DeSoto introduces his readers in the novel are consistently portrayed as racist perpetrators of apartheid’s injustices. Likewise, a comparison of white male and female attitudes in the novel is difficult to accomplish, since Märit’s husband, Ben, dies only a third of the way through the narrative. Nonetheless, I believe the novel demonstrates how Märit, as an English-speaking white woman who breaks free from the patriarchal structures of her native society, is uniquely positioned to accept and foster the concept of a non-racial South Africa. In other words, I will argue that *A Blade of Grass*, as it chronicles Märit’s progression from subservient housewife to naïve and somewhat selfish advocate of racial equality to, ultimately, the dying woman who truly understands the idea of non-racial friendship, identifies white women of British origin, like Märit, as representing the potential for social and racial change in South Africa. I will argue, to borrow the author’s own words about his work, that white “women are still capable [of doing] the unexpected, to set out on uncharted journeys of discovery” (DeSoto, *The Story Behind the Book* 9), like Märit’s discovery of a friendship that transcends the legacy of apartheid and the revolutionary interregnum that surrounds her in *A Blade of Grass*.

II. “The Missus”: Märit’s Early Identity

In examining how Märit undergoes character transformation in *A Blade of Grass*, and how she therefore represents the white female potential to change in response to South Africa’s post-apartheid needs, I believe it is useful to think of the narrative as
formed of three distinct sections, the divisions of which are, at least initially, marked by the author’s three “parts,” entitled “The Farm,” “The Land,” and “The River,” respectively. Although I think of the first section more as a definition of Mārit’s initial identity than as a description of the agricultural living she and Ben make for themselves, it is nonetheless fitting that the opening section is named “The Farm,” since Mārit’s character shares common colonial (patriarchal) roots with the farming way of life that was brought to South Africa by early European settlers. The important question then becomes, what does the author reveal about Mārit in the first part of the novel that provides readers with an understanding of who she is before her obvious character transformation begins?

As my studies of July’s People and Disgrace have demonstrated, the first description offered by authors about one of their characters can be particularly revealing, and DeSoto’s introduction of Mārit Laurens only reinforces this hypothesis: readers find Mārit sitting at a desk inside her farmhouse “with an open ledger at hand. She is putting together the weekly pay packets for the farm workers” (7). It is significant to note both Mārit’s physical location, and the task she performs, since these pieces of information help to define her role within the household patriarchy. First of all, Mārit is in the farmhouse itself, not on the land, or in any of the perimeter buildings; this introductory setting gives readers a preliminary indication of the implied responsibility Mārit has for the preservation of white domesticity, and foreshadows her later admission that “only in the house is she at home, between the walls. Only there. She might own the farm and all the land, but only in the farmhouse is she at home” (29). Mārit’s early realization that she belongs in the farmhouse, as a fixture of domesticity for Ben to return to every
evening, sets up the later discomfort and alienation she feels once she is forced to expand her presence beyond the house, after Ben’s death. The second important revelation about Märit that readers derive from DeSoto’s introductory description of her is that, as the narrative voice immediately explains, the work of financial bookkeeping “is one of her duties, one of her responsibilities. The accounts, the correspondence, the bills, the lists, the wages – these are the responsibilities that her husband Ben has entrusted to her” (7). Although Märit takes charge of the family’s finances, an economic domain that some might argue is historically occupied by men, I would suggest that her management of the servants and labourers simply constitutes an extension of her historically female domestic responsibilities, since the workers are, in a broad sense, part of the household. Moreover, Märit’s duties on the farm are not assigned by a logical matching of tasks to strengths, nor by her own volition; instead, they are delegated to her by her husband, the implicitly recognized leader of her household. In other words, Märit has no authority of her own in the farmhouse – the limited power she does have is only that which she exercises on Ben’s behalf in carrying out the work he assigns to her. In a later flashback, after Ben’s death, Märit realizes just how she was restricted to her domestic place in the farmhouse by her husband: “He did not want her next to him on the land; he wanted her to be in the house, protected and pampered, unsullied by dust and grease” (174). Ben’s patriarchal conception of a wife’s role on the farm precludes Märit from doing any physical labour (in order to preserve her feminine aesthetic value), a fact that Märit does not question or regret until the second part of the novel. Thus, at first glance, Märit appears to be an acquiescent housewife who accepts her subservient role within the typically-Afrikaner patriarchal way of life that DeSoto presents in his portrait of a rural South African farm.
Just as the pre-revolutionary Maureen in *July’s People* tends to define herself in terms of her husband’s achievements and qualifications, Märit also lacks a true identity of her own in the first part *A Blade of Grass*. Ben dreams of being a farmer, and finds the freedom to realize his dream when his father dies and he finds “cheap and fertile” farmland available in South Africa (23). In spite of Ben’s powerful desire to succeed on the farm, however, “Märit has no dream of her own for the farm, but she responds to this longing in him” (22); “she is here because of Ben, for Ben” (23). In other words, Märit assumes elements of Ben’s identity because she lacks a sense of her own distinct consciousness. The fact that Märit does not enjoy her life on the farm, but that she nonetheless dutifully continues to endure it, reinforces the picture that is developing of her at this point in the narrative as an entrenched subordinate figure within the patriarchal dynamic of her marriage.

Although Märit resembles Maureen in the sense that she lacks a unique identity, she is also similar to Bam, in that she readily accepts the mores and values of her white society, even when they are of questionable relevance to her life on the farm. Märit is lonely in the farmhouse, for instance, and wonders if she can ask Grace, the housekeeper, “to sit down, to drink a cup of tea with her.” She immediately decides against making this invitation to Grace, however, because “that sort of thing is not done. It would break all the rules” (11). As this thought process demonstrates, Märit initially believes it is more important to uphold the principles of apartheid, even when no one is watching, than to mitigate the loneliness that both she and Grace surely feel in the farmhouse, because she has never been forced to question the state’s policies, nor has she discovered in herself the requisite capacity for individual thought needed to escape from the *groupthink*
that is apartheid. In a later example, when Märit is walking home along a river in the heat of the day, she takes off all her clothing and bathes in the water in order to cool herself. In spite of the logic behind her actions, however, Märit seems to feel shame when “awareness returns” to her: “How foolish to do this. What if she were seen?” (98).

In both July’s People and A Blade of Grass, white South Africans like Bam and Märit display discomfort with ideas of nudity, immodesty, and sexuality that are almost Victorian in spirit, as if the process of being colonized has left South Africa permanently suspended in nineteenth century paradigms of decorum and propriety. In any case, Märit’s frequent inability to act on her desires, to override the oppressive values of her white culture in the face of compelling local circumstances, initially marks her as a powerless figure within the male-dominated hierarchy of her society.

In spite of my above arguments, however, a close reading of the text will reveal that Märit’s initial gestures of friendship to the meid, Tembi, take place during the first part of the novel, which suggests that Märit may have the ability to break conventions and effect change in her society even before she experiences the loss of her husband. Nonetheless, Märit’s seemingly selfless acts of warmth toward Tembi, such as her identification with Tembi’s loss of a parent (79), and her invitation to be addressed by her first name instead of as “Missus” (81), cannot be simply explained in terms of moral

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33 For instance, when young Märit finds Sondra having sex with the pool boy, Dollar, she shudders: “the shame, the awfulness, the obscenity of it. She didn’t want to see, didn’t want to hear” (104), as if the very idea of sex repels her. 34 Sparks suggests that English-speaking South Africans “inherited from their Victorian forebears of the Pax Britannica an ingrained conservatism and a sense of racial superiority” (48), while Coetzee (using the double-word play that he seems to favour) claims that “apartheid is a dream of purity, but an impure dream. It is many things, a mixture of things; one of the things it is, is a set of barriers that will make it impossible for the desire to [sexually] mix to find fulfillment” (Giving Offence 165); both writers seem to agree that apartheid encouraged the repression of certain instincts.
goodness or kindness. Rather, Märit selfishly offers Tembi employment in the house, under the guise of friendship, in order to reduce the loneliness she felt when Grace was her housekeeper. Märit plays on Tembi’s vulnerable emotional state in order to secure for herself a younger, less established housekeeper, thereby obtaining some small measure of power within the farmhouse that was absent during Grace’s tenure. I recognize that my reading of this initial relationship dynamic is somewhat speculative, but I believe my theory is supported by Märit’s excessively jealous reaction to Ben’s passing observation of Tembi’s sexuality (83-85), and by Märit’s symbolic expulsion of Tembi from the farmhouse after catching the servant taking liberties with the Missus’s clothing. In other words, that which Märit gives to Tembi in the first part of the novel, supposedly as a friend, she almost immediately takes away. Even the informality of address between the two women is gone – where Märit once asks to be called by her first name, she promptly reverts to thinking of herself as the household authority after apprehending Tembi in the master bedroom: “Let her go back to the kraal and tell the others what she had done, sneaking into the Missus’s room and wearing her clothes and sleeping in her bed” (111 – my emphasis). In A Blade of Grass, the exercise of naming serves as an act of power and independence; Märit and Ben’s farm, for instance, is called by three different names (Duiwelskop, Kudufontein, and Lebone) by various groups of people, who each assert their dreams and desires for the land by giving it a name; in fact, “everything in this country is called by more than one name. It all depends on who is doing the naming” (185). In this context, then, the white woman’s de facto

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35 J.M. Coetzee, in a discussion about the significance of the term “Afrikaner” in South Africa, argues that “naming and making a naming stick is above all, as we know, an exercise in power. A child is born wild; we name it to subjugate it” (Doubling the Point 342).
retraction of her offer to Tembi to be addressed as “Märit” signifies a stripping of power from the servant by the Missus, and reaffirms Märit’s status (at this point in the narrative) as a selfish supporter of apartheid’s racial hierarchy.

I believe that one of the purposes of the first part of the narrative is to establish how Märit, as an initially weak and dependent housewife, embodies subdued (white female variants of) Afrikaner masculine qualities that can be associated with the perpetuation of apartheid policies. In support of this argument, it would be logical to look to Ben’s character to determine if he, as the male protagonist, also actively upholds the South African government’s racist principles. Ironically, however, Ben displays liberal attitudes that are inconsistent with my assessment of apartheid as a predominantly masculine construct:

He is not naïve, he knows the risks, he knows the history, he knows that there are many who look upon him with envy, perhaps with hate. But Ben is also an idealist, and he believes that if he is fair, if he is just, if he is generous, then he will be understood, not resented, even respected. One day the ways of the country will change, and fair, just men who can farm well will be appreciated, even desired. (52)

Readers later discover further evidence of Ben’s liberal, non-racial attitudes, when Märit haughtily tells Gideon Schoon that her husband does not use the word “kaffir” (118) because of its insulting connotations. Ben’s only moral shortcoming, some might say, is that he “does not trouble himself too much with politics” (52), preferring instead to passively await a more egalitarian future – he allows himself, to borrow Nadine Gordimer’s words, “to be frightened and silenced” while others around him must “voice
thoughts that are safer left unspoken, ask aloud the awkward questions, and endure the unquestionably adult experience of being watched by the Security Police” (The Essential Gesture 89). Nonetheless, Ben’s documented aversion to the injustices of apartheid suggest that the correlation between certain Afrikaner masculine values (that Ben, despite being a British immigrant, otherwise displays in his farming and work ethic) and the racist attitudes prevalent among other whites in the country may be weaker in some instances than in others.

Ben, however, is presented as the exception of male liberality, rather than the rule, while Captain Gideon Schoon represents the more typical South African white man in A Blade of Grass. Although he speaks English, “it is with a thick Afrikaans accent, the words clipped and guttural” (116), suggesting that Schoon epitomizes the kind of genuine Afrikaaner whom Ben tries to impersonate when he changes his surname from Lawrence to the more common local spelling, “Laurens” (23). As an officer within the Defence Force’s Security Branch, and someone who is called upon to uphold and enforce apartheid’s laws, Schoon is cold and dispassionate, with a face that does not show either “pity or concern” (116), even when informing Märit of her husband’s death. He treats blacks like animals, unflinchingly applying the pejorative epithet of “kaffir” to them (118, 211), and demanding that they remain segregated from him, even after he recognizes that “defeat is a possibility” (329) in his battle to preserve the country’s racist status quo: after throwing Khoza to floor, for instance, Schoon tells the young black, “go and smoke your cigarette where I don’t have to look at you […] Voetsak!” (331). Given the biblical origins of his name, it is not surprising that Schoon’s character willingly persecutes blacks to such an extent, nor that he executes his mission with a fervour that
sustains him through the waning days of his government’s legacy. Racist attitudes like Schoon’s are also seen in Predikant Venter and in the farm wives Connie Van Staden and Eloise Pretorious (who presumably adopt the racist beliefs of their patriarchal masters – their Afrikaaner husbands), and Mārit recognizes some of this likeness when conversing with the preacher: “How similar the Predikant is to that policeman, Gideon Schoon, Mārit thinks. Both with their confident reasoning, their concern, their cold-hearted resolve” (171). Apart from Ben, or so Mārit would have us believe, the remaining white men in A Blade of Grass all share the self-assured, rationalizing thought processes that created and perpetuated apartheid. My point in this matter is simply that DeSoto, on several occasions, seems to attribute the roots of apartheid, the driving forces behind its continued presence in South Africa, to the white male psyche.

Ultimately, the Mārit who is presented in the first phase of A Blade of Grass (a phase that ends with the death of her husband) is essentially impotent, subservient, and consensually entrenched in the patriarchy of rural white South African life. She initially accepts what I hope to have shown are the distinctly Afrikaner-male racist paradigms of her society, and does not question the hierarchical way of life that supports her existence on the farm. Although she makes minor gestures of friendship toward the meid, Tembi, during the first part of the novel, Mārit does so out of selfishness, and then almost immediately retracts the small amount of power that she has bestowed upon Tembi. At

36 The name Gideon means “Destroyer” or “Mighty Warrior,” and in the Book of Judges, Gideon serves as a militant instrument of God’s will, forcing the Midianites from Israel. However, some clerics have suggested that Gideon then overzealously pursued the fleeing Midianite kings, and killed two of them against God’s instructions (King James Bible, Book of Judges Chapters 6-8). DeSoto’s choice of Christian name for Schoon’s character alludes to interesting parallels between the Captain’s pro-apartheid crusade in A Blade of Grass and the similar slaughter of innocents by Gideon in the Book of Judges.
the end of the first part of the novel, readers have a clear picture of Märit as a woman who is wholly un-empowered and unready to effect social/racial change in her environment.

III. “The Same Now...Like Sisters”: The Utopian Phase of Märit’s Development

The beginning of Märit’s character transformation takes place shortly after her husband dies, and shortly before the beginning of the novel’s second part, “The Land,” when Märit and Tembi reconcile and first spend the night together (129-132). DeSoto’s title for Part Two is again appropriate, since this portion of the novel sees Märit break free from some elements of her patriarchal native society (symbolically represented by the structured, ordered concept of “the farm”), and return to a more primitive and egalitarian way of life where she experiences a direct connection with “the land” and the (black) people who help to sustain her existence. This part of the novel could be said to represent the utopian phase of Märit’s character development, where, through the experience of loss precipitated by her husband’s death, she begins to identify with Tembi and the other blacks on the farm, finding commonality with them in their shared state of being “without,” of “not having.” Nonetheless, I call this segment of the narrative the “utopian phase” because Märit only succeeds in asserting local changes toward racial equality when there is no pressure from external influences. In this phase of A Blade of Grass, Märit finds herself somewhat content, and possessed of a greater sense of identity than when Ben was alive, but she has not yet discovered the true sacrifices that need to be made, and the human weaknesses that need to be confronted, if her non-racial model of friendship with Tembi is to endure. Thus, the second part of the novel shows in Märit a
progression toward the kind of female identity that will be required in post-apartheid South Africa, but not the complete attainment of such an enlightened state of consciousness.

Even before the start of Part Two, “The Land,” Märit begins to show important signs of character change. On the day after Ben’s funeral, for instance, Märit invites Tembi not just to live in the farmhouse, but to “share the house” (140), as a friend and an equal. Later that day, when Tembi speaks about her childhood and the forced resettlement of her family by the South African government, Märit shakes her head and looks down. She knows only vaguely of the events that take place when the government decides on a new policy to further its aims. These policies barely affect life for the privileged, of which she is one. How little she really knows, she realizes, of the lives of the invisible people around her. (144)

In other words, Märit finally recognizes her past failures of the imagination and her lack of empathy for the nation’s underprivileged blacks, a fact that, from a moral standpoint, immediately elevates her above the majority of her white peers. By taking the first step of admitting her shortcoming, Märit is then prepared to rectify her lack of awareness of the others in her life: her next question to Tembi, in what can only be construed as an effort to learn and understand more about her new friend’s past, is, “do you have any photos of yourself, Tembi?” (144). Märit’s enquiry into Tembi’s upbringing represents the white woman’s first attempt to humanize black people, and her initial break from the accepted social conventions of her native society. As a result of her new interest in Tembi, Märit comes to the realization, on her second night in bed with the black woman, that Tembi is “a stranger, but not a stranger. In the darkness, they are the same” (146).
Although there is cause for optimism in Mārit’s identification of the similarity that exists between her and Tembi, it is significant that Mārit caveats her statement with the phrase, “in the darkness.” As readers discover throughout the second phase of the novel, racial equality between Mārit and Tembi only exists under certain ideal conditions, when no one else is around to question or test the women’s friendship; thus, the fact that Mārit only sees how she is like Tembi at night, in the darkness, summarizes Mārit’s perspective throughout this part of the novel: she and Tembi are only sometimes friends, sometimes equal. In these early examples of her character transformation, Mārit shows the important ability to shift her paradigms, but she does not yet entirely embrace the concept of a non-racial society.

In the initial chapters of Part Two, readers see further evidence of Mārit’s character transformation, as she becomes stronger and more independent through her growing relationship with Tembi. Reminiscing on her earlier adulthood, for instance, Mārit remembers how “men often looked at her. And she always made sure she looked nice, as her mother wanted her to be” (155). In other words, Mārit formerly accepted the patriarchal obligation her society placed on women to strive for beauty and to be the objects of men’s desires. Faced with the harsh reality of life without an accompanying man on the farm, however, Mārit now realizes “what a burden and a pretense it is” to be objectified by men:

Perfumes and creams and mascara and lipstick – all the accoutrements necessary to make one’s self look nice. All of this is a shell, a mask that allows her to be in the world, to be like everyone else. A mask to hide the woman within, until she
disappears beneath the weight of her own appearance and wears only her own
vanity. (155 – my emphasis)

Märit’s identification of the true female identity that rests within every woman, even those who initially accept their subordinate place in white society’s patriarchy, is significant in this passage, since it foreshadows the full emergence of her socially active character later in the novel. Märit then decides to reject the impractical values of her native society by shearing her long hair until only “an uneven stubble” is left, and dressing henceforward in the sarong-like garments worn by black women (156-157). The act of independence Märit accomplishes by so dramatically altering her appearance is important because it is something that cannot be hidden from the outside world; unlike Märit’s progressive friendship with Tembi, which the white woman downplays in the presence of Afrikaner visitors to the farm, Märit’s radical physical transformation is immediately apparent to any who see her, and serves as a strong indication of her shifting values. When Tembi first sees Märit after the makeover, the white woman tells her friend, “we will be the same now,” “like sisters” (159), and Märit again suggests that she and Tembi are “like sisters” after they both cover their heads with doeks for a walk into town (183); thus, Märit’s decisions to cut her hair and don African clothing actually serve to draw the similarities between the two women out of the symbolic realm of darkness and into the concrete daylight world. Instead of passively observing how she and Tembi are the same, Märit now actively creates common ground between the black and white women. Märit subsequently becomes even more like Tembi through her performance of farm labour, such that “her arms and face lose their pale color and take on a hue like that of the grass on the veldt. The muscles in her arms and legs grow strong and fill out. She
stands upright, head erect, and the old distant look is not in her eyes as often as it used to be” (175). It seems that by this point in the narrative, the weak Märit who, in Part One, flees the farmhouse upon seeing a snake, is gone, and is replaced with a white version of the brave Tembi who rescues Märit from the serpent (74-76). As these examples of Märit’s physical transformation all indicate, after Ben’s death Märit demonstrates the strength and independence necessary to think outside the confines of her patriarchal society’s paradigms, to uninhibit the more morally conscious “woman within” herself, and to make significant progress toward the achievement of a non-racial friendship with Tembi.

I would suggest that the utopian phase of Märit and Tembi’s friendship ends midway through Chapter 32, when Joshua’s scheming presence begins to create the first of many obstacles to the development of the women’s relationship, well before the start of Part Three. Throughout this middle portion of the novel, Märit rejects many of the patriarchal structures and ideals that had previously governed her life, and she begins to recognize and accentuate the commonality that she shares with Tembi. It is important to note, however, that the women’s interracial friendship is not tested in any substantial way during the utopian phase, so this portion of the narrative merely serves to illuminate the ease of transition toward a post-apartheid racial dynamic in the context of what is essentially a social vacuum. The contentedness that the two women both feel in the time that follows Ben’s death, in other words, provides the subject for substantial contrast when increasingly hostile external influences are later introduced into Märit and Tembi’s midst, and demonstrates the incompleteness of Märit’s character transformation.
IV. Secrets, Soldiers, Lust, and Locusts: The Reality Phase of Märit’s Development

From Chapter 32 until the end of *A Blade of Grass*, the narrative chronicles a series of natural and human hardships that Märit and Tembi face, many of which place the women’s interracial friendship under extreme stress. As Märit encounters these challenges, readers discover some of the complications inherent in the cultivation of non-racial relationships within a setting that is still heavily influenced by apartheid, and the difficulties that whites have in abruptly yielding their historic power in South Africa. In other words, I will argue that the final phase of the novel (which leads to its complex and poignant conclusion) demonstrates to both Märit and DeSoto’s readers the magnitude and utter totality of character transformation that is required of whites in South Africa if a non-racial dynamic is to emerge from the country’s interregnum.

The farm’s *bossboy*, Joshua, puts the first strains on Märit and Tembi’s relationship, by trying to leverage Tembi against Märit in his bid for power on the farm. Echoing an earlier incident during which Tembi is accosted by the Afrikaner “son of old Koos von Staden” (69-72), Joshua sexually assaults Tembi and warns her to keep the violation secret from Märit (179-180). These two assaults allude to the existence of an ironic parallel between the abusive natures of both black and white men when they find themselves in positions of power, and point readers to the crucial connection between gender and race in the novel: black men (as signified by Joshua, and later Khoza and Captain Simba) only strive to replace white men at the top of South African society’s existing patriarchy, while one white woman (Märit) works to construct an entirely new

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37 This trend recurs throughout many apartheid novels: Gordimer’s *July* and Coetzee’s *Petrus* both seem interested in simply replacing the white patriarchy (a system that
form of non-racial, non-hierarchical micro-society on her farm. In other words, DeSoto uses this example to demonstrate how certain character flaws (ones that are presumably responsible for apartheid and its damage to South Africa) are linked more to the male gender than to the white race, which gives readers an early indication that the hope for new South Africa, contrary to popular belief, is not “black,” but “female.” Next, Mārit and Tembi discover that the town of Klipspring, where they intend to shop together, has been designated “whites only,” and is extremely hostile toward the two women because of their interracial association (191-194). The women face further alienation when the new bossboy, Bodule, and all the other farm employees, quit their jobs out of fear of an impending revolutionary war with the nearby (unnamed) border country (213-216). In short, these unfortunate events signal that the naïve, utopian existence Mārit and Tembi shared for a brief period is over, and that the realistic phase of their relationship has indisputably commenced.

All of the instability that these events create around Mārit and Tembi likely cause Tembi to keep the knowledge of her tiny fruit garden secret from Mārit: “A secret, when shared, is a gift, but still she holds back, perhaps because it is the only gift she has, and in the giving of it there will no longer be a gift or a secret. So she holds onto the garden for herself” (234). The growth of Tembi’s fruit garden symbolically parallels the development of Mārit and Tembi’s friendship throughout the narrative: the seeds are washed and planted in the opening chapters, but initially yield nothing; the garden is watered and nurtured during the time that Tembi and Mārit get to know one another, while Tembi is employed in the farmhouse (65); and, the seeds first sprout shoots on the subjugates them) with a new black patriarchy (that will empower them with the kind of authority previously only held by whites).
night after Märit realizes that she and Tembi are, in many ways, the same (147). It is significant, then, that Tembi decides not to share the idea of her (as yet fruitless) garden with Märit at this point in the novel, since it indicates that notions of individual possession and selfishness still prevent Märit and Tembi’s interracial friendship from bearing its metaphoric fruit.

In a continuation of the novel’s ongoing chain of misfortunes, Märit and Tembi discover that all the chickens on the farm have been slaughtered (240), which prompts their mute guest, Michael, to leave the farm in despair (244). Michael’s departure marks the end of Part Two, and leads into Part Three, “The River.” Although most of the third part of the novel is filled with more sadness and hardship for Märit and Tembi, I believe the title of this final section is nonetheless appropriate. Water, from an archetypal perspective, is typically associated with life, cleansing, and (re)birth, and rivers, unlike other stagnant bodies of water, can be said to specifically represent the flow or journey of life. As will be seen, in light of Märit and Tembi’s final, individual realizations of the value of their relationship, and of their ultimate achievement (or the birth) of a non-racial friendship at the end of their long “journey” together, it seems that “The River” is a particularly fitting title for the novel’s concluding part.

Before reaching this quasi-hopeful conclusion, however, Märit and Tembi suffer numerous other hardships. In a continuing test of their endurance that recalls a biblical plague, Märit and Tembi are swarmed by locusts that almost entirely destroy their remaining crops (259-266). The next, and perhaps most difficult, challenge the women face is the arrival of Khoza, a young black man, on the farm. Märit immediately suspects Khoza’s trustworthiness, while Tembi welcomes him as another lonely soul in search of
shelter and companionship. Tembi claims that Khoza is similar to Michael, whose presence Märit easily accepted, but Märit maintains that the two men are different (279). Although Märit never articulates the prime distinction between these two men, I would suggest that she sees in Khoza a masculine threat that never existed in Michael; while Michael’s somewhat stunted mental state rendered him “like a child,” “harmless” (228), and effectively impotent, Khoza’s male youth and strength represent a danger to Märit: “Märit looks away, offended by the vitality and the health that emanates from him, offended by the vigorous male life in him” (280). As a woman who has only recently escaped the patriarchal mould set for her by her husband, and asserted her right to the farm over the conniving bossmale, Joshua, Märit is wary of allowing virile men back into her life, in spite of the desire she also feels for Khoza.38

Märit’s worries are quickly justified when Khoza manipulates Tembi’s sexual innocence and desire, turning the black woman against Märit (294, 309). Eventually, the romantic alliance that Tembi and Khoza form forces Märit to revert to her old, Afrikaner ways in an effort to deal with her jealousy and to re-establish her place in the house. When confronted by Tembi, Märit tells her, “you forget your place” (317), as if the old master-servant dynamic should still exist between the two of them. Khoza finally ejects Märit from her own house, and curses “Voetsak!”39 at her on the way out. “The word is like a slap in her face,” and conveys a sense of ironic justice to readers as it reminds them

38 Märit’s lust for Khoza culminates in a fireside kiss (306) that recalls her childhood yearning for the black pool boy, Dollar. While Tembi’s desire for Khoza is portrayed as pure and innocent, Märit seems to be attracted to him because he represents that which has always been sexually forbidden to her – a black man. In this respect, Märit perhaps distrusts herself around Khoza as much as she distrusts the black man himself.
39 The term “voetsak” is generally regarded as an expression of extreme profanity in Afrikaans, and would translate, in English, to a cross between “fuck off” and “get lost.”
of the slap Mārit delivered to Tembi when throwing her out of the farmhouse in Part One of the novel. Mārit then regresses beyond even her white farmwife origins, screaming at Tembi, “go and fuck him on my bed, you little kaffir bitch!” (318). Thus, Khoza’s arrival on the farm proves to be an extremely destructive force for Mārit and Tembi, causing Mārit to use the same word she earlier professed to abhor against her black best friend. Khoza, as a scarce and sexually desirable man, represents the greatest real-world obstacle to Mārit and Tembi’s relationship: both women are willing to forget their friendship and emphasize their racial differences in their attempts to win the coveted man-prize.

All of the above hardships, I think, serve to demonstrate how difficult it is for Mārit and Tembi to maintain the idealized friendship they believed they shared during the utopian phase of the novel. As nature and human nature place challenges in front of the two women, they find their relationship tested and weakened, and they start to lose hope in the very possibility of a non-racial friendship. The nadir of their journey toward a harmonious post-apartheid existence leads perfectly into the novel’s bittersweet conclusion, when Mārit and Tembi finally realize what they mean to one another.

V. Sustained by the Fruit of Friendship: Reading the Novel’s Conclusion

The concluding phase of A Blade of Grass incorporates visits to the farm by both black and white soldiers, the separation of Mārit and Tembi, and Mārit’s eventual death. It is only in these final chapters that Mārit and Tembi really solidify their friendship, even in the presence of malicious external forces. They progress through their initial naïveté, through the hardships that weaken their bond of friendship, and ultimately end the novel in intense pain, but with only each other in mind. It is my position that such steadfast
consideration for one another, in spite of numerous misfortunes, signifies the existence of a remarkably strong, true friendship between Märit and Tembi.

When Gideon Schoon and his white soldiers arrive at Märit’s farm for the last time in the novel, Märit feels both “relief” and “a sense of righteous revenge” (324), because she knows that she will be reinstated in her house and Khoza will be appropriately subjugated again. Although some might construe this vindictiveness as an example of Märit’s continued belief in the principles of apartheid, I think it simply represents the human desire, untainted by racism, to see justice done: Khoza has disrupted Märit’s friendship with Tembi, and has attempted to become a black surrogate patriarch for the two women, so it is natural that Märit would want to see “proper” female order restored to the farm by displacing Khoza as a power figure inside the house. Märit’s eviction from and return to her house are significant because they again foreground the intersecting domains of race and gender in the narrative: Khoza, as the supposedly disempowered and underprivileged black man, immediately judges Märit on the basis of her skin colour, and persecutes her on that basis by kicking her out of the house. Marit, however, legitimately dislikes and distrusts Khoza not because he is black, but because he manipulates Tembi and seeks control of the farm. In this example, DeSoto again leaves readers wondering if it would be more beneficial for South Africa’s new social order to take on a “female” rather than a “black” posture.

Märit’s non-racial sense of morality is further seen in her attempts to protect Khoza from Schoon; she lies about how long Khoza has been on the farm, and covers up his arrogant household rebellion in order to keep Schoon from killing the boy (326-331). After the white soldiers leave, readers realize that Märit has totally abandoned her white
racial paradigms and embraced the idea of being a true friend to Tembi: “She no longer feels jealousy. All of that has drained away from her. She is not jealous of the woman for her possession of the man, nor is she jealous of the man.” Instead, Märit feels something else, something “bitter-sweet, both a sadness and a joy” (336): she feels joy looking at Tembi now that she sees Tembi as an equal and a friend, and she feels sadness, for she knows that Khoza has abandoned Tembi’s love. In other words, Märit no longer cares for possessions, men, society, or the farm, as long as she has her friendship with Tembi. At this moment in the narrative, Märit most represents the immense potential that exists in white women to embrace racial change in South Africa.

The next chapter, Chapter 51, sees the return of Joshua and Khoza to the farm, with a group of ruthless black soldiers accompanying them. These rebels inflict further harm upon Märit, making her serve them as a slave, and ridiculing her by forcing her to dance for their amusement (346-348). At the end of this chapter, the appreciation that Märit expressed in the previous chapter for Tembi’s friendship is reciprocated by the black woman, as she comforts and apologises to Märit for any pain she has caused. The chapter ends with Tembi cradling Märit in her arms until the crying white woman falls asleep (349), and the next morning, Tembi finds five ripening yellow fruits in her secret garden; both of these images reinforce to readers the full extent of the friendship that has grown between Märit and Tembi: “For through all the hardship and change,” both the women and the fruit “are constant in their purpose – to ripen and grow in the sun, to bring forth sweetness out of the earth” (351), and to serve as symbol of the kind of riches that can be cultivated out of new South Africa’s soil.
Earlier in my discussion, I suggested that *A Blade of Grass* ends with a bittersweet conclusion; after exposing the “sweetness” that exists in Märit and Tembi’s friendship (and in the symbolic fruit of Tembi’s garden), the novel turns to more bitter subject matter. Tembi is raped by Joshua (353-354), and then abducted by the black rebel soldiers (357); Märit is severely trampled by Joshua’s horse (358), and is left for dead on her farm. In spite of these cruelties, however, the novel’s final chapters showcase the incredible depth of Märit and Tembi’s relationship: when Märit regains consciousness, for example, all she can think to herself is, “I cannot just let them take Tembi away like that” (358-359), and later, before she slips into delirium from her injuries, “she will find a vehicle and then she will go in search of Tembi” (369).

Likewise, as Tembi is taken away with the black soldiers, “her heart aches.” She thinks to herself, “is Märit lying there in the dust, unable to move? When Tembi looks at the column of soldiers moving ahead of her she wonders if she will ever see her home again” (363-364). As this passage demonstrates, Tembi not only worries about Märit’s survival, she also affirms that her home is with Märit. This claim is tremendously significant because the idea of “home” factors so largely into the narrative: Tembi’s family is displaced from their home when she is young; Märit has no family, and therefore no home to return to when Ben dies. As DeSoto himself points out, “at the heart of the book is a simple question: where is home?” (*The Story Behind the Book* 9). In a broad sense, one might even go so far as to say that almost every work of anti-apartheid literature relates to the theme of making or finding home – home is often, in South African literature, the dream of a place where apartheid’s racism, hatred, and alienation have been eliminated. Thus, Tembi’s association of Märit with the idea of home at this point in the
novel signifies the sincerity and profundity of her friendship with Märit. Even during the bitter times that mark Märit and Tembi’s last days in *A Blade of Grass*, the women’s non-racial friendship endures, and perhaps even strengthens. Although they are separated from one another, they still draw their wills to survive from a mutual desire to return home, to each other.

In the end, Märit’s wounds overcome her, and she becomes delusional. For all practical purposes, she forgets Tembi, only remembering the idea of a “young woman who gave kindness and love” (384), but who “is gone” (386). Once Märit loses her lucid memory of Tembi’s friendship, she gives up on life, but only after eating the five fruits in Tembi’s garden, thereby giving herself enough nourishment to reach the river, where she drowns herself (383-387), and ends her pain. Tembi, in contrast, breaks free from her captors and rushes back to the farm in the hope of finding Märit. When she realizes that the river has taken Märit, Tembi resolutely collects the seeds of the fruit Märit has eaten, and, in the novel’s final sentences, vows to replant them in her secret garden: “Here she will grow that which does not as yet grow. In this small acre of the world. From here the sweetness will come. A gift. But first she must plant the seeds” (388). This bittersweet conclusion encompasses both despair and hope: on the one hand, Märit is dead, so the labours of her friendship with Tembi seem to have amounted to nothing; on the other hand, however, Tembi displays the will to start anew, replanting the seeds that represent her non-racial friendship with the white woman. Tembi obviously still believes in the idea of growing something worthwhile from South Africa’s blood-fed soil, and, through

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40 DeSoto goes to great lengths to suggest how human blood has irrigated South Africa’s soil over the years. Ben cuts his hand on a barbed wire fence, and then watches the blood “fall to the soil, down to the place where he will plant the seeds. He watches as the blood
her determination to do so, generates hope for all those who continue to build the foundations of a non-racial society in South Africa.

Although Märit’s death and Tembi’s mistreatment at the hands of the black rebel soldiers both create a sombre mood at the conclusion of *A Blade of Grass*, I nonetheless feel that the novel ends on an optimistic note. Märit’s efforts to offer Tembi a life of equality and the possibility of a shared home are ultimately accepted by the black woman, and the immeasurable sacrifices that Märit makes in order to continue her interracial friendship with Tembi are recognized and given their due value by Tembi in the form of her final resolution to replant the symbolic fruit seeds. Märit dies, but the struggles she faces, and through which she perseveres over the course of the narrative, obviously make a significant impact on Tembi, and perhaps on others: Märit demonstrates through her actions that she is ready and willing to abandon her life of privilege in order to form a small, non-racial society in her midst – she exemplifies the power that rests within white women to effect racial change within South Africa.

drips into the soil, darkening it, mixing with it” (52); “the neighboring farmers talk of blood and soil” (109); and Gideon Schoon, in the end, admits that South Africa’s natural riches all come from “blood. All this beauty rests on blood. Blood feeds the flowers and the grasses. The spilled blood of our forefathers, and of their forefathers. Every beautiful thing that the tourists see is fed by blood” (328).

41 For instance, Bodule comforts Märit when he tenders his resignation, saying, “the troubles here, Missus, it’s not your fault. You are good” (214). Similarly, being in Märit’s presence (among other things) inclines even the resolute Gideon Schoon to wonder, “were we wrong? Was everything we believed in wrong? What we were taught, how we lived, our whole way of life? It all seems misguided now. A waste” (332). In each case, the example Märit set through her actions seems to have made an impact on those around her.
VI. Conclusion

In summary, Märit’s character development in *A Blade of Grass* highlights the unique potential that English-speaking white women have to break free from the restrictive social and racial conventions of apartheid, and to lead their societies toward a new, non-racial dynamic. Although Märit temporarily regresses several times over the course of the narrative, such as when she reverts to being “the old Märit” (314-316), I believe she nonetheless demonstrates a forward trend of development that DeSoto makes seem all the more real for its minor inconsistencies along the way. Although Märit’s life is better, materially, as a housewife under Ben’s patriarchal rule, Ben’s political apathy and favourable entrenchment in the patriarchy of white South African society preclude him from catalyzing necessary racial and social changes on the farm. When Ben dies, Märit is forced to see the world through her own, more objective perspective, and she realizes, through her experience of loss and the sense of powerlessness that she often shares with the blacks around her, that she must initiate progressive changes in her local environment. Since the novel chiefly and directly addresses the often-intersecting problems of race and gender in South Africa, I would suggest that its portrayal of psychological transition and the renegotiation of racial relationships is, perhaps, the most realistic and compelling of the three novels discussed in this thesis. Unlike both the black and white men in *A Blade of Grass*, who are only concerned with where they stand in South Africa’s patriarchal system of social stratification, Märit chooses to create a new kind of egalitarian society on her farm, thereby demonstrating the kind of “female” qualities that might benefit the post-apartheid nation. Märit’s struggle to assume control after her husband’s death and her simultaneous shattering of her native society’s norms
for the treatment of blacks operate in tandem with one another to give unique insight into the English-speaking white female psyche and its seemingly exclusive ability to usher a new, non-racial era into South African social history.
Chapter 5 – Conclusion

After studying July’s People, Disgrace, and A Blade of Grass in close detail, I think it is now important to reflect on the novels from a more distanced, comparative perspective, specifically by reconsidering the joint aesthetic and moral obligations placed upon white writers in South Africa. The views that Nadine Gordimer expresses on this subject throughout The Essential Gesture, and that are quoted in the introduction to this thesis, are obviously of enduring significance to Gordimer, since she echoes them in her later essay, “Turning the Page: South African Writers on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century.” Throughout what Gordimer refers to as the “embattled awakening of our continent,” she describes the willingly accepted duties of morally conscious white writers, among whom she includes herself:

We have known that our task was to bring to our people’s consciousness and that of the world the true dimensions of racism and colonialism beyond those that can be reached by the media, the newspaper column, and the screen image, however valuable these may be. We writers have sought the fingerprint of flesh on history. (5)

As J.M. Coetzee argues in his analysis of The Essential Gesture, however, Gordimer strives to do more than simply point out that which she does not like about her government; rather, Coetzee suggests, Gordimer makes the point that it is insufficient for white writers (such as herself and Coetzee) “simply to embrace the role of dissident” (Doubling the Point 385). Both writers, it would seem, share the belief that

The white writer has to make the decision whether to remain responsible to the dying white order – and even as a dissident, if he goes no further than that
position, he remains negatively within the white order – or to declare himself positively as answerable to the order struggling to be born. (Gordimer, The Essential Gesture 278)

In other words, Gordimer and Coetzee each imply in their non-fiction that they understand and accept the dual moral obligation, as white writers of fiction in South Africa, to both represent the atrocities of apartheid, and to suggest possibilities for a more harmonious future mode of existence. They acknowledge that they must employ their fiction not only to weaken the country’s oppressive white regime, but also to help strengthen the order that is struggling to be born out of South Africa’s interregnum.

It is evident, from the preceding discussions of July’s People, Disgrace and A Blade of Grass, that key white women in the novels function as leaders of social and racial change in their interregnum societies. At the conclusions of the respective novels, Maureen, Lucy, and Märit are easily distinguished from any of the male protagonists, due in large part to the heightened understanding that each woman demonstrates for her place and role in the new South Africa. In light of the implied and seemingly accepted obligations that are placed upon South African writers of the interregnum, one is forced to wonder if there is any deeper significance to the recurring phenomenon of adaptable, enlightened, and evolutionary female characters in fictions by white writers of the period, such as Gordimer, Coetzee and DeSoto.42 Is it merely coincidental that these authors

42 There is no doubt that both Gordimer and Coetzee are white writers – apart from their physical appearances, they are also quick to self-identify in their non-fiction, perhaps as a means of “awakening” their white peers. Lewis DeSoto’s ethnicity is more difficult to establish, but he claims that he was born in South Africa “to a family that arrived from Europe in the eighteenth century” (Meet the Author 2), and that his family is “part of the Afrikaaner tribe” (Why I am not a Zulu). Based on this information I assume he is white (and that he would be considered as such under the classification system of apartheid).
choose English-speaking white women to act, in vastly different capacities, as their ambassadors for change in their novels, or can their characterization choices be explained in terms of the overarching “task of the white South African writer” described above?

I believe the common message to be derived from these three novels (predominantly via their female protagonists), regardless of whether or not the authors consciously intended such messages, is that South Africa requires a widespread adoption of “female” attitudes and values by the white population if the nation is ever to emerge from its state of interregnum. In *July’s People*, Bam tries, unsuccessfully to transplant his old white identity into his new black surroundings, while Maureen re-evaluates her white paradigms in order to seek out a new role for herself in July’s world. In *Disgrace*, David epitomizes the kind of self-justifying, inflexible white males who presumably gave birth to the idea of apartheid, while Lucy understands that it will be necessary for whites to adapt, to struggle, and to make sacrifices if they wish to “stay on” in the new South Africa. In *A Blade of Grass*, Märit’s active nurturing of her friendship with Tembi contrasts sharply with the racist (Gideon Schoon, Predikant Venter) and indifferent (Ben Laurens) attitudes of the white men who surround her. In all three novels, the men hinder social/racial evolution, while the women labour to redefine their identities in their post-apartheid worlds. The distinct impression readers get from these works is that effective social and racial change in South Africa must incorporate not only the repeal of apartheid policies, but also the eradication of all remaining (almost-equally oppressive) vestiges of the British and Afrikaner colonial patriarchies – white men continue to act as an

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43 Again, I use the word female in reference to the attributes demonstrated by Maureen, Lucy, and Märit in the novels being studied, and not in reference to any particular gender stereotypes.
obstruction to dreams of a non-racial society, while white women facilitate necessary social change. Perhaps, then, the authors are attempting to fulfill their moral obligation as white writers by suggesting the possibility that white women must abandon the patriarchies that have contained them since colonization, and lead their peoples in collective efforts to foster South Africa’s new social order, to end the country’s interregnum.

How effective have the three authors studied in this thesis been in communicating their messages of condemnation and hope to the world? If critical acclaim can be used as a measure of performance, then the authors have all successfully left their imprints upon their reading populations: Coetzee and Gordimer have both won the Nobel Prize for Literature (1991 and 2003, respectively); Disgrace won the Man Booker Prize for Fiction (1999); and A Blade of Grass was nominated for no less than five awards, including the Man Booker Prize, and was selected as one of “Heather’s Picks” by Indigo Books’ Chief Executive Officer, Heather Reisman. Looking at the matter from a different perspective, the grim vision of revolution and post-apartheid life depicted by Gordimer in July’s People never came to pass in South Africa, and some credit, however small, for this fact must be given to Gordimer and writers like her who used their fictions to critique the white regime and to hint at the qualities necessary for a smooth transition from white to black power in the country. In a politically and socially sensitive climate like that seen in South Africa over the last fifty years, where censorship and the fear of “giving offense” can often prevent accurate portrayals of society from emerging in mainstream media, the voices of authors like Gordimer, Coetzee and DeSoto become all the more important, and the fact that they address the enduring problems of race and gender so compellingly in
their narratives becomes all the more noteworthy. Their fiction has undoubtedly played a sizable role in changing paradigms throughout South Africa’s period of interregnum.

The task embarked upon by these authors, however, is by no means fully accomplished, as admitted by Gordimer throughout her sermon to the next generation of South African writers in “Turning the Page: South African Writers on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century.” As long as there are massive wealth disparities between whites and blacks, as long as women remain subject to the gender violence that has grown out of apartheid’s wake, and as long as society remains stratified along any lines of race or gender, South African writers will continue to feel the joint moral/aesthetic obligation that Gordimer described so many years ago. The country’s 1996 constitution entrenched rights “across the spectrum of race, gender, class, ethnicity, religion, language, level of ability, sexual orientation or preference” (Moffet 141), but as long as “equality in the public domain does not translate into equality in the private domain, an arena that remains highly stratified and hierarchically structured” (Moffet 142), the task of white writers to convey both the problems in their society and some potential solutions to those problems will persist. Thus, South Africa’s interregnum continues.
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