

HONORARY GRADUATE

Nadine Gordimer

The University sought to honour Nadine Gordimer, one of the greatest writers our country has been blessed with, by expressing its desire to confer on her the honorary degree of Doctor of Literature, the highest mark of its appreciation of her distinction. Miss Gordimer has honoured the University by agreeing to accept the degree.

Nadine Gordimer was born in Springs in November 1923. She was educated at the local convent school. At the age of 15 she published her first story. In 1946 she became a student at this university; but after a year she decided that her talent for creative writing called for the complete devotion of her energies. When she was only 23 she wrote one of her finest short stories, 'The Train From Rhodesia'; it appeared in *Trek*, a magazine, long since dead, but still remembered by some for its high quality. In 1949 a short story of hers was accepted by *The New Yorker* magazine, an early triumph. This was the start of a steady stream of publications. A volume of short stories, *Face to Face*, appeared in 1949; and a further volume, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, in 1952. The next year saw the publication of her first novel, *The Lying Days*, in the early chapters of which her life in the small mining town of Springs is vividly recorded. The novel is a lyrical evocation, drawn from experience, of a young girl's discovery of love and social reality in the changing environment of a little town, of the seascapes of family holidays, and of the campus of a city university. It is the most optimistic of her novels.

Thereafter a volume of short stories or a novel appeared every two or three years. Though they make demands on the reader, assume that he has undergone a liberal education and has the capacity to appreciate irony, they have been rewarded with widespread and sustained appreciation.

Today Nadine Gordimer is the internationally acclaimed author of nine collections of short stories, eight novels, and two volumes of literary criticism, *African Literature* (1972) and *The Black Interpreters: Notes on African Writing*. She is the co-editor of *South African Writing Today* (1967), and has written several plays for television. Works of hers have been translated into nineteen languages. Her success is our success — our country's success.

It is fitting that the University try to convey its appreciation of the life and work of this eminent South African, who has contributed so much to the cultural heritage of our country and the critical examination of its soul.

Nadine Gordimer's second novel, *A World of Strangers*, was published in 1958. In it she describes the interracial social and cultural milieu of liberal Johannesburg. It is a splendid depiction of the two distinct 'worlds', isolated through human will and legislative enactment; of the constraints of life under apartheid. The novel is rich in brilliantly observed and recorded scenes of urban and of black township life. Miss Gordimer's impressive descriptive power generally comes to its finest flowering in her short stories, but it is also a striking feature of her novels. Always there is a wonderful exactitude of places. Her skill in depicting characters with a sharp economy is reflected in all her writings.

Occasion for Loving, the next novel, coming five years later, moves away from the representative South African types and scenes of the first two novels. It is a confession of the failure of liberal humanism in South Africa, the dismal consequences of a life for human beings in a colour-bar society. Pessimism dominates all Miss Gordimer's subsequent novels save one: *A Guest of Honour* (1970), her longest work, in which she moves out of South Africa to examine the complexities of African socialism in a newly independent black state. It is impressive in its analysis of cross-currents in political affairs. Unlike a number of other prominent South African authors in their well-known novels, she deliberately rejects explicit protest against the denial by apartheid of human relationships, allowing the situation to speak for itself. This work was crowned with the highly regarded James Black Tait Memorial Prize.

The Late Bourgeois World (1966) is permeated with the diagnostic pessimism which has come to characterize Nadine Gordimer's closely observed portrayal in her later fiction of the changes in South African life through the seventies and early eighties.

In *The Conservationist* (1974) a Johannesburg businessman, a 'cheque-book' farmer, confronts spiritual bankruptcy against a fractured background of isolated groups of Afrikaner landowners, Indian traders and black labourers. Even more sharply than in *Occasion for Loving* and *The Late Bourgeois World*, Miss Gordimer, with sustained clarity, shows the inevitable death of both love and passion in a perverted society. As one commentator puts it, she 'portrays the slow but inevitable withering of the heart'. The novel gained for the author the joint award of the Booker Prize; nor were its merits overlooked in South Africa, for it was rewarded with the CNA Prize.

Nadine Gordimer's next novel, *Burger's Daughter* (1979), was initially banned. This produced a cry of outrage from fellow writers and critics, and from readers. In the novel the author portrays a precarious world of political dissent. Again, Miss Gordimer was awarded the CNA Prize.

The latest novel, *July's People*, published three years ago, is a fantasy of the coming revolution, symbolising the passing of the old world and the struggle of the new world to be born. It demonstrates Nadine Gordimer's consistent fidelity to the view that no conscientious writer living in this country may ignore its immediate political history. For the third time the author gained the CNA Prize.

Miss Gordimer's novels as a whole explore the effect on individuals of the politics of racial oppression. Her short stories are remarkable products of a most exacting literary form. They are characterised by a photographic eye for detail, and focus on significant moments of illumination in which the protagonist discovers, through personal failure or disillusionment, the consequences of living in an apartheid country. She has maintained fidelity to her initial realist style. Her technique and her sense of selection remain impeccable; only the themes, settings and incidents change, which is a tribute to her artistry. Running delicately through the stories are the sense of uprootedness and the difficulty of communication typical of our times. Profound compassion is fused with deep perception. In 'The Train From Rhodesia', for instance, many of us, in a moment of honest self-analysis, will see ourselves reflected in the husband, newly wedded, haggling with the African woodcarver at a station and forcing him to reduce the already miserably low price of his beautiful and beloved carving of a lion. Victorious, having made a mockery of a black man proud of his art, the husband hands the gift to his bride; she coldly rejects it. For her it is a sad moment of illumination and disenchantment — 'the discovery of the void'

One of Nadine Gordimer's volumes of short stories, *Friday's Footprints* (1960), gained for her the W H Smith Literary Award.

In her creative works Nadine Gordimer has adopted an uncompromising stand. Her vision of life in this country has grown ever bleaker. White supremacy produces a numbing of the feelings, a resistance to friendship across the colour line, and a growing, all-consuming dread of the unknown. The setting is mostly Johannesburg, epitomising the co-existence of the very wealthy and the very poor, their working together in part of their daily rounds, their living completely separate lives otherwise. The characters, most of them sensitive, kind persons, are searching vainly for the road that leads to close relationships whatever differences there be in race or class.

Always Miss Gordimer writes with taste and subtlety in a richly descriptive prose; always she is exploring the ceaseless ordeal of the human spirit. Perhaps her finest moments are when she is on the hazy borderline between private emotions and external forces.

Of her work, Nadine Gordimer has spoken seldom; but when she has spoken, she has made significant remarks. 'In South Africa,' she has said, 'in Africa generally, the reader knows perilously little about himself and his feelings. We have a great deal to learn about ourselves, and the novelist, along with the poet, composer and painter, must teach us.' In 1982, in a lecture in New York, she gave expression to anxious self-examination. To depict South Africa today she quoted a passage from the writings of the Italian philosopher Gramsci: 'The old is dying, and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms.' She then depicted her dilemma: 'There are two absolutes in my life. One is that racism is evil — human damnation in the Old Testament sense — and no compromises, as well as sacrifices, should be too great in the fight against it. The other is that a writer is a being in whose sensibility is fused the duality of inwardness and outside world, and he must never be asked to sunder this union. The coexistence of these absolutes often seems irreconcilable within one life, for me.'

A reserved person, and believing that a writer should use her time to write, Nadine Gordimer has courteously declined many of the flattering invitations from academic institutions in various parts of the world that have courted her. Those invitations that she has accepted make an impressive list. She has been a visiting professor at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in Washington, at Harvard University, Princeton University, Northwestern University and the University of Michigan. On two occasions she has been Adjunct Professor of Writing at Columbia University. This year she was invited to give the Walker Seminars at that institution. In 1979 she was elected an Honorary Member of the American Academy and Institute of Literature and Arts, and in 1980 of the American Academy of Arts and Science. In 1981 she was granted the Neil Gunn Bellowship of the Scottish Arts Council and the Modern Language Association Award of New York. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. In 1975 she received the French international Literary prize, the Grand Aigle d'Or. The famous University of Leuven (Louvain) of Belgium conferred the degree of Doctor of Literature *honoris causa* on her in 1980.

Nor has Nadine Gordimer confined her services to her fellow human beings to foreign lands. She has given the Academic Freedom Lecture at the University of Natal, Durban, and at Rhodes University, and has given unstintingly of her time and energy to promote freedom of speech and writing in this country. For three years prior to its disbandment she served on the executive of South African PEN, involving herself deeply with issues of censorship and the banning and harassment of writers who were political figures. She has organised and participated in numerous public readings.

The importance of writing by blacks in South Africa has always been recognised and stressed by her.

Nadine Gordimer has been a major inspiration to the creative life of the city of Johannesburg and its environs. The international connections that have come with fame have not drawn her away from the country of her birth, where her presence has been a constant force for good. Her continued and generous visibility, at the cost of her love for privacy, has been a significant source of hope and inspiration to more than one generation of white and black writers, students of literature, and readers.

It is indeed a privilege for the University of the Witwatersrand to confer on so distinguished a South African its degree of Doctor of Literature *honoris causa*. In so doing the University wishes to recognise her outstanding contribution, as a writer and a friend of the community as a whole, to our intellectual and creative life; her achievement, through her novels and short stories, in causing so many to lay this sorry state of things to heart; her lifelong and unswerving vision of a common culture in South Africa, no longer divided by artificial barriers of race or class; her stripping of the façade of equity in our inequitable society; her exposure of dissimulation and unwarranted self-righteousness in the privileged; her dedication to freedom of speech and freedom of the press; and her gallant fight for liberty of the enlightened spirit and man's unconquerable mind.