



Burger's Daughter

Nadine Gordimer
(1979)

PLOT AND SETTING

The novel, which was banned just after its publication, begins in **Johannesburg, South Africa in 1974 during apartheid**. At the beginning Rosemarie, or Rosa Burger, is 14 years old and her mother has been arrested for her militant ideas. The story moves to several years later when Rosa's mother has died and her father Lionel has been sentenced to life in jail. Rosa attends her father's trial and meanwhile starts a relationship with Conrad. They live together in a neglected cottage and have affairs with other people. Rosa is employed in a hospital and visits a black activist, Marisa Kgosana. They debate **whether blacks can depend on radical white activists**.

Rosa decides to go to Europe for a while and has an affair with a Paris professor, Bernard Chabaliere. In London she meets students and activists at a political meeting and changes her mind about her commitment to the cause of black martyrs. **She returns to South Africa** and in hospital she treats black children injured by police bullets. In the end **she is arrested with the charge of anti-government actions**. She becomes a political prisoner thus completing her destiny.

CHARACTERS

Rosa Burger is a white woman who tries to achieve autonomy by breaking free from her father's influence:

she is a rebel against another rebel. **Her father, Lionel Burger, is a famous Afrikaner lawyer**, a Communist who **fights against apartheid** and eventually dies in prison, while Rosa's is a revolt against the ideology of the previous generation and is connected with her sexual liberation and self-assertion. In her quest for self-awareness, Rosa leaves South Africa and spends a period of time in Europe; but after her father's death, **she comes back and resumes his political commitment**. She is now Burger's daughter, and starts to work as a physiotherapist at a black hospital, trying to restore feeling to the limbs of injured black people.

THEMES

Although the novel deals with the themes of **political struggle, racism**, the difficulty for committed whites to live in a country which denies human rights, it can be read also as **a journey into the self**, as the story of the emancipation of a woman who is trying to find her own identity and the role she wants to play in a multiracial society.

STYLE

The conflict between external and internal realities is conveyed by the **alternation of first- and third-person narratives**. Through several **flashbacks**, Rosa remembers and observes her past self in her attempt to recapture and reconstitute it, and to engage with the outside world.

Key idea

An anti-apartheid novel

Burger's Daughter deals with a group of white anti-apartheid activists in South Africa trying to overthrow the South African government. Gordimer herself was involved in South African struggle politics and she knew many of the activists, including Bram Fischer,

Mandela's treason trial defence lawyer of Afrikaner descent. She drew inspiration from Fischer's family to create the Burger family in the novel and described *Burger's Daughter* as 'a coded homage' to Fischer.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 READ the texts and note down

- the setting to the novel;
- the development of Rosa's character;
- who Lionel Burger is;
- the main themes of the novel;
- the narrative technique;
- how Gordimer created the Burger family.



The donkey didn't cry out

The passage below is set in present-day South Africa. The story deals with the search for identity of a young woman, Rosa Burger, and explores the intricacies of both personal and racial relations.

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Part I

The track went on and on. I was caught on the counter-system of communications that doesn't appear on the road-maps and provides access to 'places' that don't appear on any plan of city **environs**. I was obstinate, sure the track would be crossed by one that led to the main road somewhere; there was a cemetery half a kilometre across the veld¹ with the hired buses as prominent as sudden buildings, and the mass of black people and black umbrellas like the **heap** of some dark crop standing on the pale open veld, that mark a Saturday funeral. I gained a cambered dirt road² without **signposts** just as one of those donkey-carts³ that survive on the routes between these places that don't exist was approaching along a track from the opposite side. Driver's reflex made me slow down in anticipation that the cart might turn in up ahead without calculating the speed of an oncoming car. But there was something strange about the outline of donkey, cart and driver; convulsed, yet the cart was not coming nearer. As I drew close I saw a woman and child **bundled**⁴ under sacks, their heads jerked rocking⁵; a driver standing up on the cart in a wildly precarious spread of legs⁶ in torn pants. Suddenly his body arched back with one upflung⁷ arm against the sky and lurched over⁸ as if he had been shot and at that instant the donkey was bowed⁹ by a **paroxysm** that seemed to draw its four legs and head down towards the centre of its body in a noose¹⁰, then fling¹¹ head and extremities wide again; and again the man violently salaamed¹², and again the beast curved together and flew apart.

I didn't see the whip¹³. I saw agony. Agony that came from some terrible centre seized within the group of donkey, cart, driver and people behind him. They made a single object that contracted against itself in the desperation of a hideous¹⁴ final energy. Not seeing the whip, I saw the infliction of pain broken away from the will that creates it; broken loose¹⁵, a force existing of itself, **ravishment** without the ravisher, torture without the torturer, **rampage**, pure cruelty gone beyond control of the humans who have spent thousands of years devising it. The entire ingenuity from thumbscrew and rack¹⁶ to electric shock, the infinite variety and gradation of suffering, by **lash**, by fear, by hunger, by solitary confinement – the camps, concentration, labour, resettlement, the Siberias of snow or sun, the lives of Mandela, Sisulu, Mbeki, Kathrada, Kgosana, gull-picked¹⁷ on the Island¹⁸, Lionel¹⁹ propped wasting to his skull²⁰ between two **warders**, the deaths by questioning, bodies fallen from the height of John Vorster Square, deaths by dehydration, babies degutted²¹ by enteritis in 'places' of **banishment**, the lights beating all night on the faces of those in cells – Conrad²² – I conjure you up²³, I drag you back from wherever you are to listen to me – you don't know what I saw, what there is to see, you *won't* see, you are becalmed²⁴ on an empty ocean.

Only when I was level with the cart, across the veld from me, did I make out the whip. The donkey didn't cry out. Why didn't the donkey give that bestial snort and squeal of excruciation²⁵ I've heard donkeys give not in pain but in rut²⁶? It didn't cry out.

It had been beaten and beaten. Pain was no shock, there is no way out of the shafts²⁷. That rag of a black man was old, from the stance of his legs, the scraggle of beard²⁸ showing under an old hat in a shapeless cone over his face. I rolled to a stop beyond what I saw; the car simply fell away from the pressure of my foot and carried me no farther. I sat there with my head turned sharply and my shoulders hunched²⁹ round my neck, huddled to³⁰ my ears against the blows. And then I put my foot down and drove on wavering drunkenly about the road, pausing to gaze back while the beating still went on, the force there, cart, terrified woman and child, the donkey and man, bucked and bolted³¹ zigzag under the whip. I had only to turn the car in the

- 1 veld. Prateria.
- 2 I gained ... road. Imboccaí una strada sterrata curva.
- 3 donkey-carts. Carretti trainati da un asino.
- 4 bundled. Accovacciati.
- 5 jerked rocking. Sobbalzavano dondolando.
- 6 spread of legs. Gambe divaricate.
- 7 upflung. Sollevato.
- 8 lurched over. Vacillò.
- 9 bowed. Piegato.
- 10 in a noose. In un cappio.
- 11 fling. Scaraventare.
- 12 salaamed. Si curvò (come per un inchino).
- 13 whip. Frusta.
- 14 hideous. Terribile.
- 15 broken loose. Liberata.
- 16 thumbscrew and rack. Girapollici e cavalletto (strumenti di tortura).
- 17 gull-picked. Beccate dai gabbiani.
- 18 the Island. L'Isola (si riferisce al penitenziario).
- 19 Lionel. Lionel Burger, il padre della protagonista imprigionato e torturato per la sua opposizione all'apartheid.
- 20 propped ... skull. Ridotto ad uno scheletro sorretto.
- 21 degutted. Sventrati.
- 22 Conrad. Giovane che la protagonista incontra al processo del padre e con il quale ha una relazione.
- 23 I conjure you up. Ti sto evocando.
- 24 becalmed. Fermo per bonaccia.
- 25 snort and squeal of excruciation. Sbuffo e strido di tormento, strazio.
- 26 in rut. In calore.
- 27 shafts. Stanghe (del carro).
- 28 the scraggle of beard. La barba incolta.
- 29 hunched. Curve.
- 30 huddled to. Addossate a.
- 31 bucked and bolted. A strattoni e scatti, intermittente.



empty road and drive up upon that mad frieze³² against the sunset putting out my eyes.
 50 When I looked over there all I could see was the writhing³³ black shape through whose
 interstices poked searchlights³⁴ of blinding bright dust. The thing was like an explosion.
 I had only to career³⁵ down on that scene with my car and my white authority. I could
 have yelled³⁶ before I even got out, yelled to stop! – and then there I would have been
 standing, inescapable, fury and right, **might**, before them, the frightened woman and
 55 child and the drunk, brutal man, with my knowledge of how to deliver them over to
 the police, to have him prosecuted as he deserved³⁷ and should be, to take away from
 him the poor suffering possession he maltreated. I could formulate everything they
 were, as the act I had witnessed; they would have their lives summed up for them
 officially at last by me, the white woman – the final meaning of a day they had lived I
 60 had no knowledge of, a day of other appalling³⁸ things, violence, disasters, urgencies,
 deprivations which suddenly would become, was nothing but what it had led up to: the
 man among them beating their donkey. I could have put a stop to it, the misery; at that
 point I witnessed. What more can one do? That sort of old man, those people, peasants
 existing the only way they know how, in the ‘place’ that isn’t on the map, they would
 65 have been afraid of me. I could have put a stop to it, with them, at no risk to myself. No
 one would have taken up a stone. I was safe from the whip. I could have stood between
 them and suffering – the suffering of the donkey.

As soon as I planted myself in front of them it would have become again just that –
 the pain of a donkey.

70 I drove on. I don’t know at what point to intercede makes sense, for me. [...] I drove
 on because the horrible drunk was black, poor and brutalized. If somebody’s going to
 be brought to account³⁹, I am accountable for him, to him, as he is for the donkey. Yet
 the suffering – while I saw it it was the sum of suffering to me. I didn’t do anything. I let
 him beat the donkey. The man was a black. So a kind of vanity counted for more than
 75 feeling; I couldn’t bear⁴⁰ to see myself – her – Rosa Burger – as one of those whites who
 can care more for animals than people. Since I’ve been free, I’m free to become one.

- 32 **frieze**. Fregio.
 33 **writhing**. Che si agitava convulsamente.
 34 **poked searchlights**. Sbucavano fari.
 35 **career**. Andar di gran carriera.
 36 **I could have yelled**. Avrei potuto gridare.
 37 **he deserved**. Meritava.
 38 **appalling**. Terribili.
 39 **If somebody’s going to be brought to account**. Se qualcuno è da considerarsi responsabile.
 40 **bear**. Sopportare.

LITERARY COMPETENCE

VOCABULARY

1 READ the text and match the highlighted nouns with their meaning.

- 1 fury, violent and destructive behaviour
- 2 indications
- 3 guards
- 4 power
- 5 suburbs
- 6 the end part of a whip
- 7 rape
- 8 large quantity, pile
- 9 exile
- 10 sudden, uncontrolled reaction

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING A TEXT

2 READ the text again and do the following activities.

- 1 Find out where the narrator is.
- 2 Circle the words and phrases referring to the setting and say what kind of landscape is evoked.
- 3 Point out the lines which give the setting a connotation outside time and space.



4 Explain what the narrator witnesses.

5 Focus on the figure of the man and make notes about

- his age;
- his appearance;
- his race;
- his clothes.

6 Point out the narrator's reactions.

3 SUM up what you have learnt or inferred about the narrator throughout the passage:

- character;
- function;
- relation to the other people involved;
- sex;
- race;
- name.

COMPETENCE: ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

4 SAY whether action, sensory perception or thought, prevails in the passage. Focus on the tense shift and say what each tense conveys.

5 EXPLAIN who 'you' (lines 33-35) and 'her' (line 75) are.

6 CONSIDER the use of punctuation. What features strike you? What is their effect?

7 RECOGNISE the cinematic device used in the description of the cart by the author. Can you explain how it works?

8 ANALYSE the language of the senses.

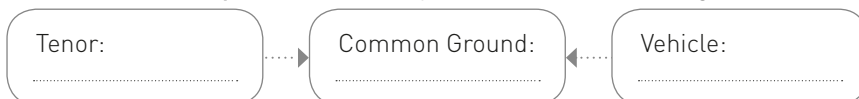
- 1 Which sense is mainly involved?
- 2 How does it contribute to your understanding of the passage?

9 REFER to the second paragraph and fill in the table with the details provided by the narrator.

What	Who	Where

10 FIND the details belonging to the semantic areas of 'violence' and 'pain'.

11 ANALYSE the metaphor of the donkey and discuss its meaning in the context.



12 FIND evidence of the issue of commitment in the text.



➤ COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS BETWEEN TEXT AND CONTEXT

- 13 DISCUSS.** Refer to Nadine Gordimer's biography and point out in what way the passage you have read might exemplify the context of South-African literature and Gordimer's experience.

➤ COMPETENCE: PRODUCING A WRITTEN TEXT ON A GIVEN SUBJECT

- 14 WRITE** a 10/12-line paragraph on the following topic, after having done some research work on the history of South Africa with the help of your teacher: 'In 1994, thanks to the joined efforts of the leader of ANC (African National Congress), Nelson Mandela, and of President F.W. De Klerk, apartheid was formally dismantled and all South Africans became citizens with equal rights.'