

Mehring is rich. He has all the privileges and possessions that South Africa has to offer, but his possessions refuse to remain objects. His wife, son, and mistress leave him; his foreman and workers become increasingly indifferent to his stewardship; even the land rises up, as drought, then flood, destroy his farm.

Supersummary : Plot Summary

Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* (1974) was incredibly relevant at the time of its release; its themes remain poignant today. Though Gordimer's daring fictional exploration of apartheid was awarded the Booker-McConnell Prize for fiction, it remained a controversial novel due to the heavy content. *The Conservationist* was banned in South Africa because of its critique of apartheid.

Set in the early 1970s, *The Conservationist* takes a bold approach to apartheid literature, as the central protagonist is a racist, rich, and utterly boring white man. Mehring is a middle-aged businessman who isn't very smart, but still has it all. He has money, he has several mistresses, and he is white. He's in such a comfortable position in life that he buys a four-hundred-acre farm just outside of the city on a whim, just to have an extra weekend hobby.

Despite being so well off, Mehring is a disgruntled and unhappy man. His ex-wife left him to go to America, his teenage son is rebellious, and the African workers on his farm don't seem to appreciate him enough. Mehring isn't a violent man, but his racism is clear through his actions and his beliefs. He thinks he is superior because he is white; he firmly believes that a black/white hierarchy is inevitable and natural. Most of the people in his life, however, disagree with his conservative ideas, especially as South Africa is in the midst of a cultural revolution against such racism.

Mehring's sixteen-year-old son Terry is the polar opposite of his father. Although he has full custody of his son, they don't get along well, because Terry is liberal and is participating in political rebellions. Mehring blames Terry's behavior on teenage arrogance and selfishness; still remaining hopeful that he'll take over the farm one day.

Mehring's girlfriend, Antonia, is another central character that challenges his beliefs. He brings her to the farm on the weekends, but she constantly taunts and berates him for being so complacent and so obsessed with his money. She's a revolutionary activist that fully expects change in South Africa; because Mehring disagrees, their relationship becomes fractured and he is left lonely once again.

Mehring, however, doesn't see a single flaw in any of his logic. Gordimer presents his thoughts as naive and matter-of-fact: he simply expects the world to give him whatever he wants because of his status and his race. He abuses his status and power by preying on younger girls. In one jarring instance, Mehring spends an entire plane ride touching a teenage girl next to him, who remains quiet until they land, and she screams for her mother's help. But, once again, Mehring isn't held responsible for his actions because of who he is.

50 The workers on his farm experience Mehring's abuse of power the most, especially his
foreman Jacobus. Jacobus is in charge of the farm more often than not, as he usually
takes over when Mehring leaves on business. Despite Jacobus being the main caretaker
of the farm, Mehring takes all the credit, refusing to acknowledge his workers'
55 dedication simply because they are, in his eyes, inferior. He criticizes his female workers
for being late to work, not caring that they have to tend to their children during that
time, and he's often grossed out by his workers' teeth, even though they're clearly
unable to afford dental care.

60 Mehring thinks he's doing enough to reward his workers, but one day, he realizes that
they don't get to eat a lot of meat. This is yet another sign of Mehring's own oblivion
and carelessness. He then "generously" buys them a single slab of meat for Christmas,
but the dog steals it since they have nowhere to store it. He watches as they beat the
dog to try to get the meat back and doesn't intervene. When they fail, he doesn't buy
them a new slab, despite being financially capable. In his mind, he's done more than
enough.

65 One day, the dead body of a black man is found on the farm. The matter isn't treated
urgently because it's just another black man. Instead of conducting a thorough
investigation, the police just tell the workers to bury the body where it was found.
Mehring is uneasy at the thought of this and is constantly haunted by the idea of this
70 dead body on his land. One night, he walks by the river and his foot gets caught deep in
some mud. He panics, fearing that the dead man is grabbing his foot and won't let him
go.

75 Meanwhile, Terry flees from South Africa. Mehring doesn't really understand the
circumstances until he speaks to his ex-wife, who tells him that Terry doesn't want to
serve in the military there since he doesn't want to fight for something he feels is
wrong. By refusing to serve, Terry cannot return back to South Africa, and Mehring feels
80 betrayed.

A terrible flood runs through town; Mehring can't get to the farm, so he leaves Jacobus
in charge. The floodwaters are so intense that they bring the dead body back to the
surface. Jacobus decides that the man deserves a proper burial this time around, and
85 the farm workers finally lay him to rest.