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Challenging Victorian ideologies of gender: The problems of contradiction in Oliver Schreiner's The story of an African farm

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CHALLENGING VICTORIAN IDEOLOGIES OF GENDER:

THE PROBLEMS OF CONTRADICTION

IN OLIVE SCHREINER'S

THE STORY OF AN AFRICAN FARM

BY

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I

Introduction

Olive Schreiner's The Story of an African Farm was first published in 1883 in England as the work of "Ralph Iron". Like many other women writers born in the nineteenth century, such as Charlotte Bronte ("Currer Bell") and Mary Ann Evans ("George Eliot"), Schreiner's use of a male pseudonym lent authority to her work. Ironically, this device also enabled women writers to exploit the sexism of the Victorian publishers and the reading public. In doing so they demonstrated the "radical understanding of the role-playing required by women's effort to participate in the mainstream of literary culture" (Showalter, 1977, p. 19). Moreover, these writers found that they could secure a place in literary history disguised as men and simultaneously attack the foundations of the society which made such disguises necessary. Schreiner attempts just this in a novel which explores Victorian ideologies of gender and the possibility of transcending gender stereotypes. In particular, through the experiences of the characters in The Story of an African Farm (Schreiner, 1883) the doctrine of the "separate spheres" is presented as restrictive and unjust, especially with regard to education, work and personal relationships. And it is primarily through the central character of Lyndall that the text suggests the possibility of transcending gender stereotypes in order to overcome these restrictions.

Upon further analysis, however, this apparent radicalism may be seen to be undermined by the contradictory nature of the text. Consequently, The Story of an African Farm (Schreiner, 1883) also appears to succumb to the conservative forces it ostensibly criticizes. This is demonstrated

through Lyndall's demise, through aspects of her behaviour, and through the use of sexist language to characterize her. Thus the text portrays both the possibility and impossibility of resisting the dominant ideologies; it is politically both optimistic and pessimistic. Rather than viewing these contradictions as aesthetic flaws which undermine the text's overall concern for sexual oppression, an alternative reading is that such contradictions ultimately reflect the problems associated with attacking the powerful ideologies of patriarchal culture from within that self-same culture.

II

Theoretical Framework

The Story of an African Farm (Schreiner, 1883) continues the investigation of the roles of Victorian women and men found in earlier works by women, such as Jane Eyre (Bronte, 1847), and The Mill on the Floss (Eliot, 1860). Schreiner's novel focuses particularly on the areas of education, work and personal relationships, possibly due to the diversity of the sexes' experience in these areas. This diversity can be accounted for in both economic and philosophical terms. For despite the geographical distance between colonial South Africa and Britain, the Industrial Revolution gave birth to an ideology of gender which had far-reaching implications. These implications have been well documented by social and literary historians such as Stubbs (1979) and Lowder Newton (1981). In particular, the movement from subsistence farming to city-based industrialism gave rise to that marked division of gender roles commonly known as the doctrine of the separate spheres. (Lowder Newton dates the emergence of this doctrine as during the 1830's and 1840's (1981, p. 19)).

For middle-class women, this led to a life of marriage and domesticity, whilst middle-class men were concerned with economic productivity and dominion. The fundamental change in the means of production resulted in man's responsibility for industrial and mercantile trade, capital growth and the generation of financial profit; it became woman's role to provide a refuge or retreat from the hostile environment of the workplace. This brought about "the consequent identification of men with the external world of work and women with the internal world of feeling" (Stubbs, 1979, p. 5). In order to establish and perpetuate this ideology of separate spheres, essentialist arguments were used to convince women and men of the "naturalness" of their constructed roles. Consequently, to challenge Victorian ideologies of gender during that same historical period was indeed a radical, if somewhat problematic act.

In a text fraught with contradictions, Schreiner explores Victorian women's and men's roles. The Story of an African Farm (Schreiner, 1883) also ventures beyond the accepted gender stereotypes in an attempt to transcend the clearly defined boundaries dictated by society. These boundaries designate the Victorian woman's role as being centred upon preparation for marriage and motherhood. Consequently, women were not seen to require a formal education, though this was not always clearly articulated. Ironically, some social theorists, such as Ruskin, wrote that both sexes were to be equally educated. However, as women were not to use their education to obtain work, it was to be " 'quite differently directed.' " (Ruskin cited in David, 1987, p. 15). Ruskin theorized that:

> "A woman in any rank of life ought to know what her husband is likely to know, but to know it in a different way. His command of

> it should be foundational and progressive, hers, general and accomplished for daily and helpful use." (Ruskin cited in David, 1987, p. 15)

Because women were to be educated for marriage and domesticity, theorists such as Spencer and Comte justified women's ensuing dependence "as a measure of social progress." (Dyhouse, 1978, p. 176). They suggested that "in the 'highest type' of civilization women would be completely 'freed' or 'protected' from any kind of productive work outside the home." (Dyhouse, 1978, p. 176). Women's personal relationships centred around notions of service and selflessness. According to the social conduct books of the time, "women were required to love and obey their parents, to love and obey their husbands, to love and care for their children" (Mews, 1965, p. 10). Any hardships which arose from this life of duty were recognised as virtues and not as problems. Hence, " 'gentle resignation' or a 'quiet air of patient suffering' were held to enhance the beauty of the woman who strove towards the ideal." (Dyhouse, 1978, p. 174). Accordingly, the image of Ruskin's and Patmore's "ethereal angel-wife" (Dyhouse, 1978, p. 176) was perpetuated.

The role of the Victorian man is also challenged in the text. As noted previously, men were to obtain an education which was " 'foundational and progressive' " (Ruskin cited in David, 1987, p. 15), so that they might obtain work. Ruskin's theory that both women and men had power appears to counter the earlier social theorists' (such as John Gregory's and James Fordyce's) notion of women's "influence" as distinct from men's power. However, the following passage illustrates Ruskin's essentialist beliefs:

> 'The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, war, and for conquest, wherever war is just, wherever conquest necessary. But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle - her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision." (Ruskin cited in David, 1987, p. 15)

Consequently it was man's role to apply his intellect and to embark upon the world of work. Obtaining employment often secured a life of independence and personal freedom. Unlike women, men were not as restricted in their personal relationships. They were relieved of much of the service and sacrifice women experienced as wives and mothers. Due to their financial independence, they were also free to choose to marry, rather than wait to be chosen.

III

The Story of an African Farm - The Problems of Contradiction

These illustrations of the dominant gender stereotypes of Victorian society are investigated in The Story of an African Farm (Schreiner, 1883), primarily through the characters of Em and Bonaparte Blenkins. This exploration may be seen to have two aspects: firstly, it criticizes the dominant gender stereotypes of Victorian women and men, particularly with regard to the areas of education, work and personal relationships; and secondly, it contrasts these stereotypes with the unorthodox gender roles assumed by Lyndall and Gregory Rose.

The text illustrates the Victorian ideal of female domesticity and subservience through Em, the step-daughter of the farm's matriarch, Tant' Sannie. The Victorian notion that woman's place is in the home, undertaking the role of wife and mother, is endorsed by Em. This is made evident through her rejection of education and work in favour of the hope of marriage. Although she is not content to live under Tant' Sannie's tyrannical rule, Em does not envisage knowledge as a means of achieving independence. Rather, Em views marriage as a liberating institution: " 'I suppose some day we shall go somewhere,' " she says to Lyndall, " 'but now we are only twelve, and we cannot marry till we are seventeen.' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 29). Em also endorses female subservience through her relationship with Gregory Rose. Em does not have to barter her subservience for Gregory's income in a marriage of necessity. However, she rejects the autonomy that her inheritance affords her in favour of Gregory's domineering affections. When Gregory professes his love, Em replies: " 'I will do everything you tell me' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 162). "What else could she say? [the narrator intrudes] Her idea of love was only service." (Schreiner, 1883, p. 162).

Whilst Em accepts the ideal of female domesticity and subservience, the text criticizes it as restrictive. This is demonstrated through her ensuing dependence and oppression. The belief that fulfilment is achieved through adherence to the dominant ideology is also attacked as limiting, as seen through Em's reliance upon Gregory Rose. She patiently waits for Gregory to return to the farm and marry her, despite the breaking off of their engagement. Em literally counts the days Gregory is away, yet when

he finally returns, and the domestic ideal is within her grasp, she finds that she is not happy. Em asks:

> "Why is it always so, Waldo, always so? We long for things, and long for them, and pray for them; we would give all we have to come near to them, but we never reach them. Then at last, too late, just when we don't want them any more, when all the sweetness is taken out of them, then they come. We don't want them then" (Schreiner, 1883, p. 277)

This speech reveals Em's misgivings about her forthcoming marriage. Her decision to marry, despite the apathy of both partners, may be viewed as a criticism of the Victorian ideal of woman's submissive "nature". As Stubbs observes, Em "philosophically accepts what seems to be her fate - the unending, numbing routine of farm life" (1979, p. 113). Ironically, Em ultimately conspires to bring about her own oppression through her adherence to the dominant ideologies.

The text depicts the Victorian ideal of man's external productivity and his dominance through the character of Bonaparte Blenkins. Blenkins articulates the view that man's role is primarily that of worker. In a conversation with the German overseer, Blenkins reflects upon his decision to go to Africa: " 'I said to my wife,' " he tells Otto, " 'There is Africa, a struggling country; they want capital; they want men of talent; they want men of ability to open up that land. Let us go.' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 45). The sentiments expressed and the historical significance of Blenkins' name connote imperialism. In so far as imperialism endorses the Victorian phallocentric work ethic, it may also be seen to endorse the ideal of male dominance. Monsman notes that Blenkins' role of patriarch

on the farm illustrates "all the roles of male dominance: overseer, schoolmaster, preacher ..., surrogate parent to Waldo; indeed he even parodies the voice of God to Adam in Eden in the fruit stealing episode" (1988, p. 590). Blenkins' role of potential husband to Tant' Sannie can also be added to this list. Although he is her employee, his status as a widower places him in the dominant position of being able to choose another wife. Tant' Sannie is subservient in this sense, for the etiquette of the Victorian ideologies surrounding marriage is that the woman must wait to be chosen, regardless of her financial circumstances. Blenkins' dominance is also suggested by the use of phallic symbolism. Repeated references to Blenkins' large nose allude, as Monsman says, to "the old jokes about the noses of the French monarchs." (1988, p. 591).

Although the text uses the character of Blenkins to portray the stereotypical Victorian male, it suggests that his adherence to this ideology is disadvantageous for the society in which he lives. This is demonstrated through Blenkins' exploitation of the farming community. Not content to merely maintain the notion of the phallocentric work ethic as a labourer, Blenkins cruelly ousts Otto in order to become overseer. In his individual pursuit of power and wealth, he places his society's welfare in jeopardy. Unlike Otto and Waldo, who both feel a bond with the land, Blenkins is one of the imperialistic "idle masters" referred to by Coetzee, who "wins a living - of a kind - from an indifferent earth." (1988, p. 78). The ideal of man's right to rule is also attacked as limiting for others through Blenkins' attempts to render Lyndall, Em and Waldo powerless by depriving them of an education. Blenkins is instrumental in convincing Tant' Sannie to withhold reading material from Waldo. " 'This book,' " he says of what

is hypothesized to be John Stuart Mill's Political Economy " 'this book is sleg, sleg, Davel, Davel!' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 97). Blenkins also extends his paternalistic censorship of knowledge to Lyndall. Em reports to Waldo that when Lyndall asked her teacher about the signs of the zodiac, " 'he said he was surprised that she should ask him; it was not a fit and proper thing for little girls to talk about.' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 60). Em continues that when Lyndall " 'asked him [Blenkins] who Copernicus was ... he said he was one of the Emperors of Rome, who burned the Christians in a golden pig, and the worms ate him up while he was still alive.' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 60). This passage demonstrates that Blenkins not only restricts the children's education by censorship, but also by misinformation. He thus exploits his role as teacher.

Similarly, the ideal of man's dominance is also criticized as restrictive to women through Blenkins' mercenary, attempted seduction of Tant' Sannie. He courts Tant' Sannie in order to move from the position of employee to that of husband. In doing so, he hopes to attain the independence and personal freedom which eludes him as a vagrant charlatan. Blenkins cunningly abuses gender stereotypes to obtain what he desires. He poses as a religious man, exploiting Tant' Sannie's cultural conditioning to heed religious teachers, and thus secures his lodgings at the farm. He also takes advantage of Sannie's conditioning to offer comfort to those in need, and to view all men as potential marriage partners, by telling the story of his wife's death. This tale endears him to Sannie and reveals his interest in remarriage. " 'Ah! that sweet word *wife* ,' " he grieves, " 'when will it rest upon my lips again?' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 64). Finally, Blenkins exploits Sannie's conditioning to

believe that a woman's body is more important than her intellect. He does this through flattery, "telling her in the broken Dutch he was fast learning how he adored fat women, and what a splendid farmer he was." (Schreiner, 1883, p. 83). The use of comedy in the portrayal of both Blenkins and Tant' Sannie may be seen as a further criticism of the dominant gender stereotypes. Monsman remarks that "because of his mythic/parodic presentation of patriarchal power Blenkins should not have been more realistic. He is a typical satiric figure of irrealism and is artistically very valuable as such." (1988, p. 589) The text also makes use of irony to criticize Blenkins' attempts to achieve dominance through deception. Although he employs the dominant ideologies of gender to ingratiate himself with Sannie, his adherence to these ideologies is his own undoing. Sannie's conditioning to accept her body as her principal asset makes her extremely jealous of Blenkins' lovemaking to her niece. Enraged by the intimate scene she views through the trapdoor in her loft, Tant' Sannie becomes a kind of parodic "madwoman in the attic". She throws a shoulder of mutton down at the traitor and furiously drives him from the farm.

Through a focus on the characters of Em and Blenkins, The Story of an African Farm (Schreiner, 1883) both illustrates and criticizes Victorian gender stereotypes. The text, however, moves beyond critique to also explore the possibility of transcending these stereotypes through the characters of Lyndall and Gregory Rose. In doing so it presents an alternative to the dominant ideologies regarding education, work and personal relationships, and continues to reinforce its criticism of the restrictiveness of these ideologies. Despite these criticisms of gender

stereotypes, the text appears to succumb to such stereotypes through the apparent futility of the transcendent characters' lives. Such contradictions between what the text appears to be saying and what it might otherwise reveal suggest, at the level of plot, that society is an obstructive and unchangeable force.

Lyndall's attempt to transcend gender stereotypes is focussed on a number of issues: the decision to obtain an education; the choice of a career; and the rejection of marriage. In each case, however, an initial and apparent victory is problematized through the contradictions in the text. Consequently, Lyndall's "triumphs" are shown to be limited, if not undermined entirely.

Lyndall attempts to transcend the Victorian ideal of female domesticity and subservience through her decision to obtain an education and a career, and through her rejection of marriage. Lyndall's plan " 'to be very wise, and to know everything - to be clever' " presents an active alternative to the ideology of woman's necessary and "natural" dependence on, and subservience to, father, husband or relative (Schreiner, 1883, p. 29). She is not content to passively wait for a "prince" to rescue her from her situation as a penniless orphan: " 'When you are seventeen,' " she remarks to Em, " 'you will have this farm and everything that is upon it for your own; but I, ... will have nothing. I must learn.' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 30). Lyndall's decision to reject the idea of passively awaiting marriage also transcends the stereotypical female role of wife and mother. She rejects RR's proposal despite her pregnancy and the fact that it prevents her from proceeding to actively fulfil her ambitions.

The text criticizes gender stereotypes as restrictive through the difficulties Lyndall encounters in transcending them. The ideology that woman's place is in the home is reinforced by the problems Lyndall experiences in convincing Tant' Sannie to let her go to school. Tant' Sannie's deep seated prejudices against education may be viewed as a result of her cultural conditioning. Education for women was regarded as a challenge to man's dominance. It was actively discouraged to enable men to retain both domestic and economic control through apparent intellectual superiority. In Tant' Sannie's case, this is further reinforced through restrictive religious superstitions. Due to these superstitions, Tant' Sannie initially rejects Lyndall's request to be formally educated: " 'Didn't the minister tell me when I was confirmed not to read any book except my Bible and hymn-book,' " Tant' Sannie says to Waldo, " 'that the Devil was in all the rest? And I never have read any other book ... and I never will!' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 97). Through sheer persistence Lyndall finally convinces Tant' Sannie to allow her to attend boarding school. However, the equivocal nature of Lyndall's success is suggested by the details of the school curriculum; Lyndall finds that her education is to take the form of preparation for a domestic life. In a conversation with Waldo, she reflects that the young women students were encouraged to make cushions " 'and hideous flowers that the roses laugh at, and a footstool in six weeks that a machine would have made better in five minutes' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 169). The text reveals that Lyndall's transcendence is only made possible through her rejection of the school syllabus in favour of self-education. She does this through reading books and newspapers, and through social interaction in her holidays.

A further irony is raised when Lyndall attempts to use her education. Although she envisages "books, [and] learning , ... [as] a key to freedom", she soon experiences "their limits." (Lessing, 1956, p. 107). She tells Waldo that the dilemma of the educated woman is that " 'What she would be she cannot be because she is a woman; so she looks carefully at herself and the world about her, to see where her path must be made.' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 198). Lyndall recognises that woman's physical attractiveness is held in higher regard than her intellect. She therefore considers that she should become an actress. By doing so, she reasons that she will be able to disguise her intellect with her beauty, and still be able to use it.

Despite the apparent success of Lyndall's decision to become an actress, this career choice ironically perpetuates the very conventions she rejects. Her ambition endorses the idea that women have to use their bodies to obtain what they desire. Hence Lyndall's earlier cynical remark, that her dimpled chin is of more use to her than an education, proves true. As she asserts:

> "I can win money with it, ... I can win love. I can win power with it, ... I can win fame. What would knowledge help me? The less a woman has in her head the lighter she is for climbing. I once heard an old man say that he never saw intellect help a woman so much as a pretty ankle; and it was the truth." (Schreiner, 1883, p. 172)

What was a critical attack upon the restrictive nature of Victorian ideologies of gender ironically becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. A further irony is evidenced in Lyndall's choice of occupation, given the role women have been conditioned to act out in their daily lives. However,

Lyndall believes that an actor can acquire an honourable and independent living from "seeming", whilst a woman who uses her body to obtain marriage ultimately gains only debasement and dependence. As she states: " 'A woman who has sold herself, even for a ring and a new name, need hold her skirt aside for no creature in the street. They both earn their bread in one way.' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 173).

The restrictive nature of the dominant ideologies is further illustrated through the difficulties Lyndall experiences in rejecting a relationship with RR. Describing her love for her "stranger", Lyndall reveals that it is the type of love " 'that blots out wisdom, that is sweet with the sweetness of life and bitter with the bitterness of death, lasting for an hour; but it is worth having lived a whole life for that hour.' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 210). Their sexual attraction is depicted as destructive, based as it is upon a dynamic of dominance and subservience rather than mutual love and respect. However, instead of forfeiting RR's affections entirely, Lyndall decides to "live with her lover, rather than marry him [or leave him]." (Stubbs, 1979, p. 113).

Ironically, although rejecting the ideal of marriage, through remaining with RR, the text endorses male dominance, especially in conjunction with romantic love. RR is portrayed as the stereotypical male suitor - selfish, demanding and virile. Lyndall's socialization into subservience is evidenced through her statement that she " 'could love so, that to lie under the foot of the thing that I love would be more heaven than to lie in the breast of another.' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 214). This statement confirms the notion that Victorian women had an innate "submissive instinct ...

[that] forced them into an attitude of sexual submission, both physically and mentally." (Green, 1983, p 48). In this respect, Lyndall's attraction to RR's dominance endorses the master-rule of the male through strength and fear: " '[I love you because] you are strong,' " she informs RR, " 'you are the first man I was ever afraid of.' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 219). Another irony is presented in this statement in that the text does not describe RR as a physically powerful, overbearing man. On the contrary, he is portrayed as somewhat foppish:

> his tall slight figure reposing ... his keen blue eyes studying the fire from beneath delicately pencilled, drooping eyelids. One white hand plays thoughtfully with a heavy flaxen moustache; yet once he starts, and for an instant the languid lids raise themselves (Schreiner, 1883, p. 216)

This description of RR endorses the comment that "all the men in the second part who enter the farm ... are secondary, belated, insubstantial, or impotent." (Gilbert & Gubar, 1989, p. 57). However, it is plausible that Lyndall's perception of RR as "strong" may be due to her subconscious accession to culturally constructed notions of romantic love. Hence her resolve to totally reject RR is weakened.

The text's criticisms of sexual inequality are also undermined by Lyndall's relationship with Gregory Rose. Lyndall considers marrying Gregory primarily because she can dominate him. This contradicts the text's earlier endorsement of sexual equality, through Lyndall's argument that it is the only way to foster love and respect between the sexes: " 'By every inch we grow in intellectual height,' " Lyndall hypothesizes, " 'our love strikes down its roots deeper, and spreads out its arms wider. It is for

love's sake yet more than for any other that we look forward to that new time.' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 178). Ironically, Lyndall's childhood intention to address the imbalance of power in the world is contradicted by her adult desire to replicate patriarchal relationships. In doing so, as Monsman notes, she fails "to realize that the solution to a transformation of the master-servant hierarchy in a paternalistic society is not a role reversal but a role of dissolution." (Monsman, 1988, p. 594). The possibility of achieving such a "role of dissolution" is disregarded by the text through Lyndall's rejection of a relationship of equality with Waldo. Lyndall tells Waldo:

> "I like you so much, I love you. When I am with you I never know that I am a woman and that you are a man; I only know that we are both things that think. Other men when I am with them, whether I love them of not, they are mere bodies to me; but you are a spirit" (Schreiner, 1883, p. 193)

This revelation, paralleling Catherine's spiritual affinity with Heathcliff in Wuthering Heights (Bronte, 1947), presents an alternative to a relationship of dominance or subservience. However, although Lyndall concedes that she loves Waldo and considers him to be an intellectual equal, she fails to recognise him as a possible partner. The lack of a power struggle in this relationship and its subsequent impotence suggests the text's preference for an imbalance of power rather than equality.

Further textual contradictions are evident in Lyndall's relationship with Em. The text attacks woman's sphere as restrictive through Lyndall's comment that Victorian women "fit" their

> "sphere as a Chinese woman's foot fits her shoe, exactly, as though God had made both - and yet He knows nothing of either. In some of us the shaping to our end has been quite completed. The parts we are not to use have been quite atrophied, and have even dropped off; but in others, and we are not less to be pitied, they have been weakened and left. We wear the bandages, but our limbs have not grown to them; we know that we are compressed, and chafe against them." (Schreiner, 1883, p. 172)

The oppressive nature of the ideology of separate spheres is contradicted in Lyndall's later comments to Em that duty to others is more important than duty to self. " 'It is nice to be loved,' " she tells Em, " 'but it would be better to be good.' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 215). The text also succumbs to its previous criticisms of woman as a "female commodity exchanged patronymically from father to husband" (Donaldson, 1988-89, p. 9) through Lyndall's relationship with Em. Although she inverts this stereotype, Lyndall's attack upon love which is " 'bought or sold' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 178) is contradicted in her payment to Em for the use of Gregory Rose: " 'Fifty pounds for a lover!' " Lyndall remarks to herself, " 'A noble reward.' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 223). Lyndall's uneasy conscience may be read as a punishment for her behaviour towards her friend. This would prove Waldo's stranger's prophecy that " '[experience] will teach that whoso takes a love not lawfully his own, gathers a flower with a poison in its petals ... that whoso wrongs another clouds his own sun.' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 153-154). Yet the text continues to contradict its earlier criticisms, as spoken by Lyndall, that marriage without love is " 'the uncleanliest traffic that defiles the world' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 173). This is made evident through Lyndall's letter directing Gregory Rose to

marry Em. Hence she continues to betray her friend from beyond the grave.

Lyndall's failure to transcend the Victorian role of female domesticity and subservience is further illustrated by the novel's presentation of her pregnancy and death. Lyndall's demise is due to both physical and intellectual constraints. Through Lyndall's pregnancy, the text perpetuates the belief that biology is destiny. It subsequently endorses traditional notions of female and male creativity. For females, creativity is seen to occur in the physical sphere, as demonstrated by Lyndall's literal creation of a child. Alternatively, male creativity is seen to occur in the intellectual sphere, as evidenced through Waldo's creations which are gestated over nine months. Therefore, whilst Waldo may be seen to "unconsciously" transcend his gender role by considering his "intellectual creations as offspring" (Barash, 1989, p. 273), due to his sex he escapes the physical constraints of pregnancy and childbirth. Although Lyndall tells Waldo that she has made a mistake (her pregnancy) and that she will have the strength to overcome it and achieve her ambition to become an actress, this does not transpire. Depicted as a victim of her own biology, Lyndall is physically weakened by her pregnancy, as if this aspect of biological functioning saps the strength this woman requires to continue challenging her society. She describes herself as able to " 'see the good and beautiful ... and have no strength to live it, [which] is only to be Moses on the mountain of Nebo, with the land at your feet and no power to enter. It would be better not to see it.' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 179).

Intellectually, Lyndall's need for something to worship, that will deliver her from selfishness, contradicts her convictions as a child to actively acquire that which she desires. When Lyndall arrives home from boarding school, she has the oratorical skill to make known her views on the position of women. Yet, although she is hopeful that one day there will be " 'a new time' " of equality for all, she does not wish to bring about this " 'new time' " herself (Schreiner, 1883, p. 179). In answer to Waldo's (and the reader's) question as to why Lyndall does not use her gift as a speaker to campaign for equal rights, Lyndall replies: " 'I will do nothing good for myself, nothing for the world, till someone wakes me. I am asleep, swathed, shut up in self; till I have been delivered I will deliver no one.' " (Schreiner, 1883, p 179). This sentiment is repeated throughout the text. Such words present a contradictory picture of Lyndall in the guise of Sleeping Beauty - content to wait for a 'prince' to waken and deliver her. Until then she will not become actively involved in bettering the position of women.

However, Lyndall is not awakened by a "prince" due to her untimely death. Although quite recovered from the trauma of childbirth, Lyndall becomes ill after sitting in the rain at her baby's graveside:

> It was a drizzly day; a little time after someone saw her sitting on the wet ground under the blue gum tree, with the rain dripping from her hat and shawl. They went to fetch her, but she would not come until she chose. When she did she had gone to bed, and had not risen again from it; never would, the doctor said.
> (Schreiner, 1883, p. 250)

As Lerner notes: "Lyndall, like so many other Victorian heroines, goes into a decline: that mysterious complaint, unaccompanied by any precise diagnosis, which is somehow quintessentially female" (1983, p. 7). This "decline" appears to arise due to the text's inability to envisage Lyndall's success. Through the scenes leading up to Lyndall's death, the text endorses the notion that woman's suffering (preferably in silence) exalts her spiritually. To Gregory's enquiries as to whether she suffers physical pain, Lyndall replies in the negative. Yet unknown to Lyndall, Gregory witnesses her pain: " 'Oh, God, God! have I not borne in silence?' " Lyndall cries melodramatically (Schreiner, 1883, p. 255). " 'I do not ask for wisdom,' " she continues, " 'not human love, not work, not knowledge, not for all things I have longed for ... only a little freedom from pain! only one hour without pain! Then I will suffer again.' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 255). The text idealizes this pain through describing Lyndall's face as "refined by suffering into an almost angel-like beauty." (Schreiner, 1883, p. 262). What Lyndall perceives to be her selfishness, her pursuit of individual happiness without regard for other oppressed members of society, is disproportionately censured by the text. The text is arguably punishing her for her unorthodoxy. Her self-indulgent remorse is exaggerated beyond proportion, conveying the idea that she wants to prostrate herself at the foot of all humanity, and allow herself to be trampled into the dust. She reflects upon her life to Gregory:

> "I see a vision of a poor weak soul striving after good. It was cut short; and, in the end, it learnt, through tears and such pain, that holiness is an infinite compassion for others; that greatness is to take the common things of life and walk truly among them; ...

> that happiness is a great love and much serving." (Schreiner, 1883, p. 261)

These sentiments express Lyndall's recognition that she must move from selfishness to selflessness in order to obtain peace of mind. However, her concept of selflessness requires the notion of "much serving" to have passive, rather than active, connotations. Lyndall here champions the moral ideal of selflessness and duty to others which is central to much nineteenth century fiction, as demonstrated in the works of George Eliot, Charlotte Bronte, and Charles Dickens. However, for women, this ideology often merely perpetuated their servitude and oppression. Instead of serving others through actively working to combat sexual inequality, and thus help herself, Lyndall's comments suggest that service should take the form of domestic duties and sacrifice. In this respect the text again undermines the belief that the ideology of female domesticity and subservience can be successfully transcended.

Lyndall's attempts to transcend the dominant gender stereotypes are paralleled by those of Gregory Rose. In this way, the text challenges the notion of man's need to be economically productive and the necessity of male dominance in relationships with women. Gregory temporarily transcends these notions through his decision to reject his education, which has prepared him to fulfil the role of farmer, in favour of acting as a nurse to Lyndall. Gregory also rejects a relationship in which he is the dominant partner, with Em, for a relationship in which he is the submissive partner, with Lyndall. Gregory offers himself to Lyndall, telling her:

> "I thought I loved before but now I know! Do not be angry with me. I know you could never like me; but if I might always be near you to serve you, I would be utterly, utterly happy. I would ask nothing in return! If you could only take everything I have and use it; I want nothing but to be of use to you." (Schreiner, 1883, p. 213)

In pleading to be accepted as a submissive partner, and relinquishing the self for love, Gregory mirrors Em's submissiveness to him. This capitulation contradicts his own previous claims that he is " 'not the man to beg and pray - not to any woman' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 204).

The text reinforces its criticisms of the dominant gender stereotypes through the difficulties Gregory experiences in transcending them. Gregory, as his surname connotes, is a feminine character who has several idiosyncrasies stereotypically ascribed to women. For example, he pays a great deal of attention to domestic neatness, keeping his home "scrupulously neat and clean ... just as he had seen his mother do" (Schreiner, 1883, p. 156). He is also overly concerned with his appearance. However, despite his sensitivity, and his suitability for the role of caregiver, he experiences many difficulties in entering this profession. This reinforces the idea that it is not man's role to be nurturant. Hence, Gregory is prevented from obtaining the work he desires. In a letter to his sister, he reveals how his femininity has caused him unhappiness in his childhood and in his relationship with his father:

> You know what sorrows I have passed through, Jemima; how unjustly I was always treated at school, the masters keeping me back and calling me a blockhead ... you know how cruelly father

> always used me, calling me a noodle and a milksop, just because he couldn't understand my fine nature. You know how he made a farmer of me instead of a minister, as I ought to have been. (Schreiner, 1883, p. 158)

Gregory's plight illustrates how those who are not suited for the dominant stereotypes are still expected to conform to society despite their unhappiness.

Due to the beliefs which prevent Gregory from openly fulfilling his ambitions, he finds that the only way he can succeed is covertly. (In this respect, the plot parallels the author's use of a disguise, a male pseudonym, in order to attain credibility). Gregory's transformation from a man to a female nurse, in the chapter ironically entitled "Gregory's Womanhood", enables him to secretly explore his femininity. It would not be acceptable to patriarchal culture if he publicly declared his desire or intention. Gregory's success as a nurse is indicative of how the ideologies of the time limited men's roles to the detriment of both the individual and society. The doctor says to the hotel owner that Gregory is " 'the most experienced nurse I ever came in contact with.' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 254). Gregory's ability to demonstrate unselfish concern is made evident when he gives Lyndall a letter from her "stranger", despite his fear that she may be taken from him. Through this action the text implies that a profession recognised as suitable for women teaches Gregory selflessness in his personal relationships. This contrasts with his previous selfishness in his relationship with Em.

The text reinforces its criticisms of male dominance through the difficulties Gregory experiences in rejecting his position of dominance with Em, in favour of a subservient relationship with Lyndall. Due to cultural conditioning to accept male supremacy, Gregory initially finds it difficult to come to terms with Lyndall's "masculine attributes". Hence, he at first dislikes her active nature which directly challenges the Victorian stereotype of woman's passivity. In a letter to his sister, Gregory admonishes Lyndall's masculine behaviour, criticizing her for driving a buggy: "I don't think it's at all proper for a woman to drive out alone," he complains, describing such behaviour as "unwomanly." (Schreiner, 1883, p. 189). Due to his cultural conditioning, Gregory also experiences difficulties in rejecting Em as a partner. Obviously at odds with his sexuality, Gregory "dithers between fantasies of masculine power and self-abnegating service" (Monsman, 1988, p. 594). However, his relationship with Em reinforces his masculinity and makes it easier for him to conform to social expectations. Despite such reinforcement, the truth behind this mask of masculinity is revealed to Gregory in his own mirror. His repeated glances into the looking-glass unsettle him, because he sees the reflection of a feminine man, and not the culturally constructed, masculine farmer that his father wants him to be. These glimpses of reality eventually drive Gregory to exchange his dominance over Em in favour of subservience to Lyndall.

Despite the apparent success of Gregory's "rebellion", closer analysis reveals it to be illusory. Gregory's subservience to Lyndall is undermined through the covert maintenance of his dominance. This is made evident at a symbolic level. Adopting the role of Prince Charming, and the power

that this role embraces, Gregory seeks Lyndall out with her slippers in his hand: "a pair of velvet slippers ... tiny slippers with black flowers ... Only one woman's feet had worn them, he knew that." (Schreiner, 1883, p. 247). When Gregory does locate the feet small enough to fit these slippers, the only way in which he can attain the "princess bride" is to disguise himself and serve her. However, in doing so, he serves himself. He proves his words to Em that he " 'will have her [Lyndall].' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 228).

Gregory's rejection of the role of farmer in favour of the role of caregiver is also undermined through his return to the farm after Lyndall's death. He does not consider continuing to covertly act as a nurse. Subsequently, he also returns to his relationship of dominance with Em, even if he appears to be rather apathetic about this role. He is described as listless after his return, "his dead pipe lying on the bench beside him, and his blue eyes gazing out across the flat, like one who sits on the sea-shore watching that which is fading, fading from him." (Schreiner, 1883, p. 275). Although Gregory resumes the orthodox gender role stereotype, Marquard writes that the text "does not compromise by offering a private and domestic bliss as a substitute ... There can be no fulfilment in one-sided love: Em and Gregory Rose, like Waldo and Lyndall, pin their faith to an illusion." (1976, p. 44).

The analysis of the text's character-based exploration of the dominant ideologies of gender reveals The Story of an African Farm (Schreiner, 1883) to be contradictory in its political beliefs. In demonstrating the possibility and impossibility of transcending gender stereotypes, the text is politically both optimistic and pessimistic. This dichotomy is further evidenced

through the use of non-realist modes and sexist language. Optimism is conveyed by Lyndall's speeches, and through symbolism and parable. However, the pessimistic portrayal of society as obstructive and unchangeable is augmented by the use of sexist language throughout the text.

Through Lyndall's central speech in the chapter of her name, the text reveals the cultural construction of gender stereotypes. This speech, including its symbolic content, is optimistic in its implicit suggestion that because gender is culturally constructed, it can also be deconstructed. Thus it poses the possibility of changing society, and bringing about sexual equality. Refuting the notion that "because men and women are biologically different, they have different needs and abilities which must be reflected in their social roles" (Tuttle, 1986, p. 38), the text theorizes that women and men are not born into separate spheres. Rather, it stipulates that the sexes are culturally conditioned by society to believe that they have different social roles due to their biological differences. " 'We all enter the world little plastic beings,' " Lyndall informs Waldo, the silent listener, who in this case exists primarily as a textual object at which she preaches. " 'With so much natural force, perhaps, but for the rest - blank; and the world tells us what we are to be, and shapes us by the ends it sets before us.' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 171). Using this same simple diction, in order to ensure clarity, Lyndall identifies man's sphere as "work" and woman's sphere as the ability to "seem":

> "To you it [the world] says - *Work!* and to us it says - *Seem!* To you it says - As you approximate to man's highest ideal of God, as your arm is strong and your knowledge great, and the power to

> labour is with you, so you shall gain all that the human heart desires." (Schreiner, 1883, p. 171)

By way of contrast, however, women are not granted the same opportunities. Lyndall goes on, drawing attention to this inequality: " 'to us it [the world] says - Strength shall not help you, nor knowledge, nor labour. You shall gain what men gain, but by other means. And so the world makes men and women.' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 171). The text's conception of woman's sphere as "seeming" as opposed to "being" illustrates the "objectification" of women by the culture in which they live:

> the process of viewing women not as individual, complex persons, but as sexual objects which exist only in relation to male desire. This is done by identifying women solely with their bodies, either whole, or fragmented and fetishized as parts (Tuttle, 1986, p. 229)

It follows that if women are seen as the "Other", then the means by which they can " 'gain what men gain' " alludes to the use of their bodies as currency in patriarchal culture (Schreiner, 1883, p. 171). The fact that such a feminist speech informs the text can also be viewed in an optimistic light, as symbolic of woman's refusal to be silenced by patriarchy. In this sense the text rejects the notion of "woman's talk" as unimportant prattle, allocating at least one whole chapter to Lyndall's extrapolations on the position of women.

The distinction between "Self" and "Other", as identified in this speech, is critical in understanding one of the central symbols employed by the text. Using the common rhetorical strategy of illustrating theory with an example, Lyndall describes how young girls are not permitted to play with

their brothers outdoors. This is in case their faces burn in the sun and they spoil their white dresses. Instead, she says, they stay inside and thread blue beads, and look into their mirrors at what they are not to spoil: " 'and we look into our own great eyes. Then the curse begins to act upon us. It finishes its work when we are grown women, who no more look out wistfully at a more healthy life; we are contented.' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 172). This image of a girl and then a young woman looking into a mirror is repeated throughout the text, symbolising the disruption of unity within the female psyche. This disruption may be seen to occur when woman is unable to discern the difference between the culturally constructed image she views in her mirror and her true self. The mirror symbol is optimistic in its revelation that gender stereotypes can be successfully transcended. This is made evident in the scene detailing Lyndall's death. Her final look into the mirror reflects the same image it did of her as a child and as an adult, an image which has continually rejected its constructedness and the duality of "Self" and "Other". "The body was dead now," the narrator closes the chapter of Lyndall's life, "but the soul, clear and unclouded, looked forth." (Schreiner, 1883, p. 265).

The optimism conveyed by these isolated speeches and symbols is , however, undermined through the text's use of sexist language. This is particularly noticeable in the scenes describing Lyndall. The text may be seen to be sexist primarily through its recurrent description of female characters in the diminutive, its objectification of female characters, and in its selection of personal pronouns. In the opening chapter, Lyndall is depicted as an ethereal being: "The figure in the companion bed belonged of right to the moonlight, for it was of quite elfin-like beauty." (Schreiner,

1883, p. 20). Such a description calls to mind the way in which the character of Jane Eyre (despite her plainness) is described in the novel of the same name as an " 'almost unearthly thing!' " and a " 'pale, little elf.' " (Bronte, 1847, p. 296 & p. 301). Through its use of such language, The Story of an African Farm (Schreiner, 1883) perpetuates the Victorian notion of woman as not quite real or human. Contrasted with Lyndall, Em is depicted as a "a yellow haired child, with a low forehead and a face of freckles; but the loving moonlight hid defects here as elsewhere, and showed only the innocent face of a child in its first sweet sleep." (Schreiner, 1883, p. 20). Here the text reverses the stereotype of the blonde, beautiful, "good" heroine, by portraying Lyndall as a dark, beautiful "bad" heroine - a siren. Em's recompense, however, described in Tant' Sannie's words, is that " 'It is better to be ugly and good than pretty and bad; though, of course, it's nice when one is both' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 58).

Although Em's obesity is often referred to, ("She was grown into a premature little old woman of sixteen, ridiculously fat"), certain descriptions of her contradict her largeness (Schreiner, 1883, p. 137). When placed in close proximity to any of the male characters, Em is depicted in the diminutive. Male dominance in thus established in the form of bulk. For example, when depicted with Gregory, Em is referred to as having a "little yellow head," and as Gregory's "little betrothed" (Schreiner, 1883, p. 195). Even Waldo refers to Em as " 'little one' ", and she is described as having a "little foot" (Schreiner, 1883, p. 277). Although Lyndall may be small in stature, she is frequently referred to in the diminutive. This is most apparent in her interaction with RR. Contrasted with RR's languid strength, Lyndall is described as a " 'poor little thing!' " and as " 'only a

child.' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 221). RR lifts Lyndall onto his knee as if she is a child (as Mr Rochester does to Jane Eyre), and the text describes her as looking into his eyes "like a little child whom a long day's play had saddened." (Schreiner, 1883, p. 221). Such descriptions belittle Lyndall's intellectual stature. In this same scene Lyndall is also referred to as having a "little hand", a "little figure", and a "queenly bearing", which is "bent" and "drooping wearily". (Schreiner, 1883, p. 221). She is also referred to by Em as "a princess" (Schreiner, 1883, p. 166). Through such descriptions the text trivializes women and endorses the notion of their physical and mental inferiority. Everything about Lyndall appears to be little, including her feet. This may be seen to symbolise her oppression, but also reinforces the oppressive nature of "man-made" language (" 'language ... still primarily under male control' ") (Spender cited in Moi, 1985, p. 156). Such language is used to describe women as smaller, inferior and, to use de Beauvoir's terminology, "Other". During Lyndall's illness she is also referred to as an object, rather than a person: " 'A pretty thing, isn't it?' " the landlady asks Gregory of Lyndall (Schreiner, 1883, p. 253). When she falls over through trying to walk after days of lack of nourishment, she becomes "the little crushed heap of muslin and ribbons, ... [Gregory] laid it on the bed. Doss climbed up, and sat looking down at it." (Schreiner, 1883, p. 263). The use of the the pronoun "it" renders Lyndall an inhuman object, reduced to a pile of finery. Although the text may be suggesting that both sex and gender are irrelevant at such crisis points, Blake refutes this by comparing Lyndall's death to Waldo's: "Near the end she is 'what lay on the cushions' " she writes (1980, p. 83). "When Waldo dies, the farmyard chickens climb on 'him' and perch on 'his' shoulder, hand and

hat. But when Lyndall dies, we read of 'the' not 'her' eyes, body, soul, and face." (Blake, 1980, p. 83).

In addition to Lyndall's feminist monologues, a further example of the use of non-realist modes to convey optimism is demonstrated through the parable of the search for Truth, as told to Waldo by his "stranger". In this case, optimism is undermined through certain characters' comments endorsing the impossibility of social change. The parable of the search for Truth may be seen to describe Lyndall's life, and her search for the unity of "Self" and "Other" within a society based upon binary oppositions. This search is difficult and causes great suffering on the part of the seeker. However, it is an active quest which is ultimately fruitful not only for the seeker but for the entire community. The man in the parable says:

> "I have sought ... for long years I have laboured; but I have not found her [Truth]. I have not rested, I have not repined, and I have not seen her; now my strength is gone. Where I lie down worn out other men will stand, young and fresh. By the steps that I have cut they will climb; by the stairs that I have built they will mount. They will never know the name of the man who made them. At the clumsy work they will laugh; when the stones roll they will curse me. But they will mount on *my* work; they will climb, and by my *stair!* They will find her, and through me! And no man liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself."
> (Schreiner, 1883, p. 150)

On the surface, these words appear to override the pessimistic vision which is presented through the notion that Lyndall's death is a mere punishment for her feminist convictions. However, this optimistic

interpretation of Lyndall's role is contradicted by comments endorsing the futility of struggling against society. Lyndall remarks:

> "A little bitterness, a little longing when we are young, a little futile searching for work, a little passionate striving for room for the exercise of our powers, - then we go with the drove. A woman must march with her regiment. In the end she must be trodden down or go with it; and if she is wise she goes." (Schreiner, 1883, p. 172)

Similarly, Waldo states: " 'When we lie and think, and think, we see that there is nothing worth doing. The universe is so large, and man so small' " (Schreiner, 1883, p. 199-200).

IV

Conclusion

The Story of an African Farm (Schreiner, 1883) portrays the stereotypical Victorian woman and man through the characters of Em and Bonaparte Blenkins. The text contrasts these characters with Lyndall and Gregory Rose, who suggest the possibility of transcending the dominant stereotypes. Through non-realist modes such as Lyndall's speeches, the text reinforces the optimistic belief that society can be changed for the betterment of both sexes. However, this radical attack upon sexual oppression is undermined through the text's inability to break free from its own conservative cultural assumptions. Hence the contradictions within the text. For every success Lyndall and Gregory appear to attain, there is a failure which implies the impossibility of transcendence. In contrast to the optimistic non-realist modes, the use of sexist language presents a pessimistic vision of society as obstructive and unchangeable. Such

contradictions produce a text which not only challenges Victorian ideologies of gender, but which ultimately challenges itself, proving Marquard's words that "you do not escape the desert [of patriarchal discourse] - you take it with you." (1976, p. 47).

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