

Twentieth-Century  
Literary Criticism

TCLC 235

Volume 235

# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the  
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers  
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,  
from the First Published Critical  
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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**Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 235**

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# Preface

Since its inception *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by some 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 1000 authors, representing over 60 nationalities and nearly 50,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, "there is nothing comparable available." TCLC "is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own."

## Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, TCLC helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in TCLC presents a comprehensive survey on an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of TCLC is devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, (CLC) which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between CLC and TCLC.

## Organization of the Book

A TCLC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym is listed in the author heading and the author's actual name is given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the name of its author.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose



works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication. Lists of **Representative Works** by different authors appear with topic entries.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it originally appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included. Criticism in topic entries is arranged chronologically under a variety of subheadings to facilitate the study of different aspects of the topic.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *TCLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces a paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Kuester, Martin. "Myth and Postmodernist Turn in Canadian Short Fiction: Sheila Watson, 'Antigone' (1959)." In *The Canadian Short Story: Interpretations*, edited by Reginald M. Nischik, pp. 163-74. Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2007. Reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Vol. 206, edited by Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau, 227-32. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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# Olive Schreiner

## 1855-1920

(Full name Olive Emilie Albertina Schreiner; also wrote under pseudonym of Ralph Iron) South African novelist, essayist, short story writer, and critic.

The following entry provides an overview of Schreiner's life and works. For additional information on her career, see *TCLC*, Volume 9.

### INTRODUCTION

The first major South African author writing in English, Olive Schreiner is considered a significant social critic of the early twentieth century and a pioneer in the feminist movement. She is best known for her semi-autobiographical novel, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), which introduced readers to the indigenous cultures and landscapes of the southern African region, and *Woman and Labour* (1911), a social document challenging Victorian notions of female sexuality and the role of women in society, which was once regarded as "the Bible of the international feminist movement." In these works, as well as her essays, short stories, and longer works of fiction, Schreiner promoted the themes of freedom, gender and racial equality, female solidarity, and justice, while questioning prescribed social and moral codes related to religion, sexuality, and social organization. Although scholars have debated her narrative craftsmanship, Schreiner remains an important figure of twentieth-century literature, who is widely praised for her social commitment and progressive ideas. As many critics note, her writings influenced generations of later writers and thinkers, particularly those associated with the feminist movement. Robin Hackett has argued that Schreiner's works—from her early publications, which developed themes about women's emancipation, to her later writings, "which promote the cause of an integrated South African society based on racial and sexual equality and freedom"—reflect a "principled, passionate, and also contradictory" effort to achieve one goal: "to advance the cause of human freedom."

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Schreiner was born March 24, 1855, on the Wittenberg mission station in the isolated frontiers of what was then known as the Cape Colony, in South Africa. Her

missionary parents, Gottlob and Rebecca Lyndall Schreiner, had traveled to southern Africa in the late 1830s as part of the London Missionary Society. The ninth of twelve children, Schreiner received no formal schooling but educated herself by reading the works of John Ruskin, Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, John Locke, Thomas Carlyle, Friedrich von Schiller, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. In 1865 her father violated the missionary society's trading prohibition and lost his post, thereby placing the family under great financial strain. As a result Schreiner experienced a nomadic lifestyle for the next few years, living in the houses of friends and relatives. At one point she lived in a tent with two older siblings in the New Rush, now Kimberley, diamond fields.

As a young adult Schreiner worked as a governess on several Afrikaner farms in Cape Colony's desert plain, known as the karoo, and became increasingly disillusioned with the religious and political patriarchal systems that limited the freedoms of women. She devoted much of her free time to writing during this period, and when she left for England in 1881, she brought three nearly complete novels with her. The first of these, *The Story of an African Farm*, was published in 1883 by Chapman and Hall. The first two editions of the book appeared under the pseudonym Ralph Iron, but the third edition was published under Schreiner's name. Originally Schreiner intended to train as a nurse in London, but due to her lack of formal education and struggles with chronic asthma, she abandoned this pursuit in favor of a literary career. During the 1880s the author became involved with the Men and Women's Club in London, where intellectuals met for frank discussions of social issues, including "the Woman Question," which concerned the fundamental role of women in modern society. She also developed a close friendship with social reformer Havelock Ellis and briefly became romantically involved with the eugenicist Karl Pearson.

Schreiner's physical health deteriorated during her time in England, which proved to be an inhospitable climate for her asthmatic condition. She traveled briefly to Italy before returning to South Africa in 1889, where she remained for the next twenty-three years. In 1894 Schreiner married a farmer named Samuel Cron Cronwright, and together they had one daughter, who died soon after she was born in 1895. Schreiner and her husband, who changed his last name to Cronwright-Schreiner, were deeply involved with social issues and

became prominent figures in South African political affairs. A strong proponent of individual and worker rights, Schreiner spoke on behalf of the Boer cause during the South African War of 1899-1902, which ultimately resulted in the British defeat of the independent Boer republics. She expressed some of her concerns and political views in the 1899 pamphlet, *The South African Question; by an English South African*, published in England as *An English-South African's View of the Situation: Words in Season*, in which she appealed to the conscience of the British people in her protest against the impending conflict. The essays collected in *Thoughts on South Africa* (published 1923), originally written for the *Fortnightly Review* during the 1890s, address similar concerns, as the author reflects on the life, history, and culture of South Africa communities but also provides a sharp critique of England's capitalist mining interests.

Schreiner was also concerned with issues of women's rights and supported suffrage for women of all races. In 1911 she published one of her best-known nonfiction works, *Woman and Labour*, which explores these issues as well as the author's thoughts on marriage and education. Growing increasingly disillusioned with her own marriage, Schreiner traveled to England alone in 1913, under the guise of seeking treatment for her worsening asthmatic condition. She felt isolated in wartime London but took comfort in the presence of her brother, W. P. Schreiner, who served as the High Commissioner for South Africa from 1914 to 1919. She remained in England for the duration of World War I and struggled to complete another novel, titled *From Man to Man; or, Perhaps Only*. . . . (published 1926), but was unable to finish the work as a result of her failing health. Schreiner and her husband were briefly reunited in London during the summer of 1920, but fearing another English winter, the author traveled back to South Africa without him, while he made plans to join her several months later. Before he could return, however, Schreiner died during the night of December 10 or 11, 1920, and was buried on a mountaintop overlooking the farmland where she had spent her youth. Several of her works were published posthumously, including an apprentice work, *Undine* (1928), which Schreiner had written during the 1870s.

## MAJOR WORKS

During her career Schreiner produced several longer works of fiction. In her early novel *Undine*, the author experimented with various modes and methods of storytelling, while addressing the major themes of her literary career, including the clash between conventional and personal definitions of womanhood, the restrictions of patriarchal society, and the difficulties of courtship

and marriage, as well as the experience of growing up in the harsh South African landscape. The novel follows the tumultuous life of its titular protagonist, an independent and unconventional orphan who struggles to adapt to the demands of adult life. Neither at home in Africa or England, Undine engages in several disastrous romantic encounters before submitting to a loveless marriage, in order to help the man that she really loves. The novel ends ambiguously with regard to Undine's development. A widow, she returns to Africa and finds economic independence, but once again enters a relationship with an unworthy lover.

Schreiner's first published novel, *The Story of an African Farm*, is still considered the most successful of her literary career. Divided into two parts, the novel explores a variety of themes, including isolation, confinement, aspiration, corruption, and power, as well as the loss of faith and the position of women in a patriarchal society. In the first part of the work Schreiner examines the political tensions taking place on the South African frontier during the late nineteenth century by following the attempted colonization of a small African farm. Bonaparte Blenkins, a hypocritical European and farcical figure in the novel, courts Tant' Sannie, the owner of the farm, and together they form a tyrannical, although ignorant, ruling force. Eventually Blenkins is chased away, after attempting to seduce Tant' Sannie's rich niece.

The second part of the novel is primarily concerned with the lives of the three young people who are raised on the farm, as they mature into adulthood. Waldo is the visionary son of the farm's usurped German overseer, while Lyndall is an independently minded orphan, who seeks knowledge and authority. Em, the last of the three children, is a docile girl who embraces the traditional expectations associated with womanhood, including service, passivity, and marriage. While both Waldo and Lyndall leave the farm, Em stays and becomes engaged to an English colonial named Gregory Rose. Lyndall is sent to a finishing school for girls but returns to the farm pregnant with her lover's child. Lyndall refuses to marry the father, however, believing that marriage would not satisfy all of her desires. Gregory Rose, meanwhile, falls in love with Lyndall, and later takes care of her after the death of her newborn, disguising himself as a woman in order to remain anonymous. Lyndall dies in spite of Rose's attentions. Upon his return to the farm, Gregory relates his story and eventually marries Em, who is now the owner of the property. Waldo also returns to the farm but is dismayed to discover that Lyndall has died. Gradually, however, he begins to experience the beauty of nature again and is reconciled with life. One beautiful day he dies on the farm, just after a long drought has broken.

In 1897 Schreiner published the novella *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*, in which she articulated her

frustration and disgust with the growing imperialist and racist behavior of Cecil Rhodes's Chartered Company, which during the 1890s controlled the regions of Matabeleland and Mashonaland and sought to unite South Africa under British rule. Schreiner especially disliked the British treatment of native Blacks and the Boer republics of South Africa. The protagonist of the novella, Peter Halket, is a moral and decent English soldier, who nonetheless shares the mercenary views of his countrymen and members of the Chartered Company, which has employed him and other British soldiers to suppress the Mashonaland Rebellion of 1896-97. During a dream Peter is confronted by Christ in disguise, who impels him to consider the atrocities the Chartered Company has committed against native African people, including looting, murder, and rape. Peter resolves to redeem himself, and at the end of the novella is shot to death while aiding the escape of an African prisoner. The final image of a Black man's and a white man's blood flowing together at the foot of a tree is a powerful one that has been recalled by later South African writers.

Schreiner's last work of fiction, *From Man to Man*, although unfinished, explores complex themes associated with the experience of womanhood during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The novel treats the diverging fates of two English sisters, Rebekah and Bertie, who spend their childhood on a South African farm. The older of the two, Rebekah, is stronger than her sister and driven by intellectual pursuits. She marries her cousin, Frank, and becomes a mother, but emancipates herself after discovering his multiple infidelities. Now caring for her own children, as well as the mixed-race child fathered by her husband, Rebekah begins to lead a separate life, eventually discovering love and intellectual companionship in a relationship with her neighbor, Mr. Drummond. When Drummond embarks on a journey to explore Africa, however, Rebekah refuses to abandon her family to follow him. Bertie, on the other hand, falls prey to the double standards of Victorian social conventions. Engaged to be married, she is rejected by her fiancé after confessing that she was seduced by her tutor. Now a victim of gossip and ostracized by her community, Bertie moves to London under the protection of a jealous merchant. In London Bertie suffers from homesickness and loneliness, despite the affections of her patron. When he believes that she has seduced his cousin, the merchant discards Bertie, and she is forced to fend for herself in an alien environment. At the point where the novel breaks off, Bertie is reduced to living as a prostitute in a brothel.

Among the most significant of Schreiner's sociological writings, *Woman and Labour* collects the author's thoughts on the role of women in society, the question of women's rights, the nature of female sexuality, and the institution of marriage. One of the central ideas ad-

ressed in the study involves the necessity of work for both men and women. Tracing evolutionary patterns and historical examples, Schreiner charts a decrease in meaningful labor for women with the rise of industrialization, resulting in a condition she describes as "parasitism," or passivity and economic dependence. With the loss of valuable work for women, Schreiner observes, their virtues and abilities are neglected, and as a result, women are relegated to the role of "sex parasite." While the author champions motherhood in the work, she contends that it should not exclude women from taking on other fulfilling occupations. Schreiner also argues that a corollary relationship exists between the Victorian model of marriage and prostitution, examines the sexual objectification of women, and asserts that women should be both sexually responsive and responsible. According to some scholars, many of Schreiner's ideas regarding female sexuality were directly influenced by her correspondence with Havelock Ellis.

Although Schreiner's longer prose works have been the primary focus of many recent assessments, some scholars have also studied the author's short stories and allegories, as presented in *Dreams* (1890), *Dream Life and Real Life: A Little African Story* (1893), and the posthumous collection *Stories, Dreams and Allegories* (1923). Among the most notable pieces collected in *Dreams* are "Three Dreams in a Desert," "In a Ruined Chapel," and "The Sunlight Lay Across My Bed." "Three Dreams in a Desert" is an abstract story that explores issues of gender equality and the struggle for freedom. "In a Ruined Chapel" addresses themes related to forgiveness and the characteristics that connect human beings to each other, while "The Sunlight Lay Across My Bed" describes a vision of the world as Hell, governed by selfishness and violence.

Schreiner also incorporated short prose pieces into her longer works of fiction. For example, "The Hunter," which appeared in the collection *Dreams*, occurs at the center of *The Story of an African Farm* and, according to some critics, serves as an interpretative key to the novel. In this story the hunter is an everyman figure on a quest to find the White Bird of Truth. He pursues this bird throughout his lifetime, catching only glimpses of it at various points, and finally, just before he dies at the foot of a mountain, a large white feather drifts downward into his hand. "The Child's Day" was published as a prelude to *From Man to Man*. This story recounts the day that Rebekah's mother delivers twin girls, Bertie and another, who is stillborn. Rebekah accidentally discovers her doll-like stillborn sibling and intends to adopt it. During this "child's day," Rebekah develops for the first time an understanding of death, as well as sexuality. At the end of the story, she is found asleep in a protective posture around her living sister, Bertie.



"Eighteen-Ninety-Nine" (1904) is another important short work of fiction in Schreiner's oeuvre, which like much of her longer works explores political themes. In this tale Schreiner depicts the Boer way of life, including their fierce loyalty to family, community, and the land, while highlighting the capitalist greed of the English, who threaten their freedom. The narrative is constructed from the memories of a woman, who during her life has witnessed the massacre of her family in the Great Trek of the Boers, and later, the death of her husband, sons, and grandson, Jan, who is killed during the Boer War in 1899. In addition to death, rebirth is an important sub-theme in the work, which suggests that political freedom can be achieved at some future point following the martyrdom of Jan.

### CRITICAL RECEPTION

Schreiner first came to the attention of readers and critics with the publication of her semi-autobiographical novel, *The Story of an African Farm*, in 1883, which originally appeared in England under the pseudonym of Ralph Iron. The exotic setting and original subject matter of the novel appealed to Victorian readers, while early reviewers praised its unconventional treatment of such topics as religion and marriage. When the third edition of the book appeared under the author's own name, Schreiner became somewhat of a celebrity in England, although some readers, on discovering the work was written by a woman, dismissed it as un-Christian and anti-feminine. Her next published work, *Dreams*, was also enthusiastically received. While some critics connected the oracular short stories of the collection with Platonic myth and German and British Romanticism, others compared them to the visionary ideals of the French Symbolists.

During the remaining years of her life, Schreiner was increasingly preoccupied with addressing social and political issues in her writings, such as women's rights and South Africa's racial problems, which drew both admiration and condemnation from readers and critics. The anti-imperialist sentiments expressed in *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*, for instance, alienated those readers that supported England's interests in African affairs and politics, while it was hailed by Afrikaners and others who opposed Britain's growing presence in southern Africa. *Woman and Labour*, which is considered Schreiner's most important social document, likewise drew disparagement and praise when it appeared in 1911. Many agreed, however, that the book offered a persuasive and accurate assessment of the social and economic oppression women faced in Victorian society. This work particularly had a profound influence on women's rights activists and feminists of the early twentieth century, including English author Vera Brittain.

In the years following Schreiner's death, several manuscripts were published that the author had deemed unworthy or incomplete, including *Undine* and the unfinished novel *From Man to Man*. Scholars generally viewed these as inferior and poorly developed works compared to *The Story of an African Farm*, which, in the words of Ursula Laredo, was the only novel in which the author had managed "to transform her own painful experience into part of a meaningful pattern," and where "suffering is seen to be inevitable, not merely undeserved personal misfortune."

In the decades following her death, discussions of Schreiner's formal tendencies and her treatment of gender and racial issues have dominated critical studies. In addition, as a result of several biographies and critical books devoted to the author, focus has expanded to include Schreiner's entire canon, including her short fiction and allegories, as well as her posthumously published novels. Cherry Clayton has examined the collection *Dreams*, arguing that in this work Schreiner developed a secularized form of allegory as a vehicle for criticizing patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism in South Africa. A number of critics, such as Joyce Avrech Berkman and Laura Chrisman, have approached Schreiner's short fiction, allegories, and other writings as a guide to her social and political views.

Most relevant to current assessments of Schreiner is Chrisman's claim that the author, like "many nineteenth-century white English women writers," articulated her feminist identity, not in opposition to "hierarchical notions of ethnic and cultural difference," but in "collusion with" the dominant social order. This theme—the ambiguity of Schreiner's political and feminist thought—can be seen in other recent readings of her work. Carol Barash has described Schreiner as a woman who "embodied radically conflicting ideological and narrative positions," maintaining that she both "participates in a racist mythology and begins to deconstruct that mythology from women's perspective within a colonial system." In his study of *The Story of an African Farm*, Bart Moore-Gilbert has noted the ways in which Schreiner's "western (proto-)feminism accommodated itself fairly unproblematically to imperial and racial ideology."

Most recently, Robin Hackett has addressed a number of the author's nonfiction writings, as well as *The Story of an African Farm*, and asserted that, despite her efforts to achieve racial equality in South African society, Schreiner "uses African people and the southern African landscape rhetorically, as the raw material with which to construct [an] . . . intellectually advanced race of New European Women and Men capable of leading humanity into the modern age." While acknowledging that some of Schreiner's positions were inconsistent and "certainly naïve," Joyce Avrech Berkman

has asserted that the author nonetheless “surpassed her most brilliant political contemporaries in South Africa in her understanding of the nature and course of South African affairs.” And in a tribute to *The Story of an African Farm*, Ode Ogede has unequivocally praised Schreiner for “daring to evoke a rare imaginative empathy that offered brotherly love as the most effective counter to oppression,” at a time when most white writers treating the subject of Africa were “at best indifferent toward the plights of the victims of colonization.”

Despite such differences of opinion with regard to Schreiner’s thought and literary contribution, the author remains a pivotal figure of the early twentieth century, whose revolutionary ideas helped shape the feminist movement, as well as Western perceptions of southern African culture and society. In the words of Judith L. Raitskin, “Olive Schreiner’s writings are important not only because of what they tell us about South African history and politics, British colonialism, and feminist thinking a century ago but also because they provide us with an example of an individual mind grappling with major ideological shifts in science, national politics, and gender relations.” Raitskin concludes that “Schreiner played an active role in the intellectual debates of her time, and her work provoked as much as reflected the changes we can identify from our perspective almost one hundred years later.”

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

- The Story of an African Farm* [as Ralph Iron] (novel) 1883  
*Dreams* (short stories) 1890  
*Dream Life and Real Life: A Little African Story* (short story) 1893  
*Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (novella) 1897  
*The South African Question; by an English South African* [also published as *An English-South African’s View of the Situation: Words in Season*] (essay) 1899  
*Closer Union: A Letter on the South African Union and the Principles of Government* (essay) 1908  
*Woman and Labour* (nonfiction) 1911  
*Stories, Dreams and Allegories* (short stories and allegories) 1923  
*Thoughts on South Africa* (essays) 1923  
*From Man to Man; or, Perhaps Only . . .* (unfinished novel) 1926  
*Undine* (novel) 1928  
*An Olive Schreiner Reader: Writings on Women and South Africa* (short stories and essays) 1987

## CRITICISM

### Frank Harris (essay date 1924)

SOURCE: Harris, Frank. “Olive Schreiner: Ad Memoriam.” In *Contemporary Portraits: Fourth Series*, pp. 289-93. London: Grant Richards Ltd., 1924.

[In the following essay, Harris recounts his acquaintance with Schreiner and his first reading of *The Story of an African Farm*, which he describes as the author’s only significant work.]

I first met Olive Schreiner in the office of the publishers, Chapman and Hall—in 1883, I think.

A few months before, Frederic Chapman, the head of the house, had talked to me about a book that had been offered them for publication, *The Story of an African Farm*. He said he had sent it to Meredith, who was then the reader for the house, and Meredith had praised it enthusiastically, while advising the author to make some corrections.

Naturally I exclaimed that I would like to see any book that Meredith had praised, particularly a book about South Africa, which I happened to know pretty well, for I had stopped at Cape Town on my first journey round the world and had been infinitely interested in both Boer and Briton in that magical half-explored continent.

A morning or two later I went across the corridor from the *Fortnightly* office to the office of Frederic Chapman, and noticed two or three books on the side of his desk. He picked one up and said:

“Oh, here’s *The Story of an African Farm*, that you wanted; and, if you would care to see the author, she is coming to-day between eleven and twelve. She’s rather a pretty little Jewess. You might like to know her.”

I said I would be on hand, and turned back into the *Fortnightly Review* office and sat down to look at the book. In five minutes I was interested, fascinated, absorbed.

The faults of the book stared at me, but the magic of it was in my blood. Here was all the witchery of the high veldt and the strange barbaric land with its mountains and kloofs, great forests and strange wild animals, and, above all, the entrancing climate of the high, African plateau, where one has the blazing tropic sunshine and the champagne-like, dry, intoxicating air. Here, too, were fairy sunsets and magic sunrises, and here were real people—modern in this most romantic of all settings. The book came into me in long draughts.

Suddenly—it seemed as if only ten minutes had passed—Chapman called me, saying: “Won’t you come across? Miss Olive Schreiner is here, and would like to meet you.”

I went across and was introduced. Chapman, eager to get to his own business, soon packed us both off into the *Fortnightly* room. We sat down and talked for an hour or so.

Olive Schreiner was at that time a girl of about nineteen; distinctly pretty; large dark eyes, black hair, and little square strong figure—the figure betraying the Jew in her more strongly than her face; yet the race characteristics were marked, too, in the slightly beaked nose and southern dark complexion.

She told me she was the daughter of a missionary, and was born in Basutoland. Her chief desire she made plain to me at once. She wanted to know all the writers, especially the novelists: would I introduce her to Thomas Hardy and George Moore? I told her I could easily arrange a meeting with Moore, but that Hardy was more difficult. He came to London only on visits. It would need time to get him.

The other desire in her was to put forward the feminist view. She was a suffragette before the name became known, and later embodied her passionate views on the matter in a little booklet, “**Women and Labour**,” which had a certain influence in favour of woman suffrage, both in England and America.

She was very much interested so long as I praised *The Story of an African Farm*, and I praised it enthusiastically; but, as soon as I began criticising it as a story, she seemed to lose interest in what I said. Her manner became detached, so to speak, and she either would not or could not follow me. I gave up the attempt, rather amused by her self-centred complacency.

A few days later I had George Moore in the office to meet her. He did not know South Africa as I knew it, and so had not been struck by the magical representation in the book of the atmosphere of the high veldt and all the local colour implicit in such a landscape. He thought the book a poor one.

While we were still talking about it, Miss Schreiner came in. She did not seem to make much impression on Moore, but Moore evidently made an astonishing impression on her. I stood in frank surprise and watched the pair. Was it Moore’s light golden hair and pale complexion or his prominent blue eyes that won her? I cannot say, but it was plain that she admired him. She looked at him with all her soul in her eyes. He held forth upon the supreme value of the naturalistic novel, with phrases borrowed chiefly from Zola, that I had

heard a hundred times already and did not believe in; but which she listened to entranced, with parted lips. I stood by and grinned to myself, wondering what the upshot would be.

Curiously enough, her admiration for Moore brought my interest in her to an untimely end. No one could be really important to me who admired Moore so intensely.

I had already found out that she knew little or nothing of any social question, was interested almost exclusively in writing and in improving the status of women. She soon became an even more enthusiastic admirer of Edward Carpenter than she had been of George Moore, and I found this devotion more comprehensible, though I could not believe in Carpenter’s genius.

Afterwards she used me as an editor and sent me some of her “Dreams”—slight, obvious allegories—some of which I published, but without admiring them; published as a journalist would, because of the extraordinary success of *The African Farm*, which caused a real sensation in London. More than once she told me that she had written half a dozen novels better than *The African Farm*, but no one ever saw any of them so far as I could learn, and as time went on I took leave to doubt the story.

I remember Sir Charles Dilke telling me that he looked upon *The African Farm* as the ablest book ever written by a woman. Remembering Emily Brontë and the poems of Christina Rossetti and Barrett Browning, I could only shrug my shoulders and smile at his enthusiasm; but later I met Miss Schreiner at Dilke’s, and found that he was still a fervent admirer. She herself had won to poise now, and a mature self-satisfaction; and when she spoke, it was with a little air of authority and finality which sat prettily upon her pretty face, and amused me hugely. I felt sure that we had got all the best of her in her first book. In a year or two she drifted out of London, and we heard of her marriage in 1894 with a certain indifference.

But before the South African War came she spoke again in *Trooper Peter Halket*, a really passionate arraignment of Cecil Rhodes’s policy; and later still she told of the war in a book entitled *An English South African’s View*.

She was very honest, very sincere; her soul, flame-like, burning to a high, thin point in admiration of truth and beauty and what she knew was right; she stood always in favour of the Boers, whom she understood, and against the English, whom she admired.

And after years came the news of her death. Well, her work was all done, and it was good work, noble work from beginning to end. May the South African earth she loved rest lightly upon her. *Ave atque vale*.



Marion V. Friedmann (essay date 1955)

SOURCE: Friedmann, Marion V. "The Novels." In *Olive Schreiner: A Study in Latent Meanings*, pp. 1-18. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1955.

[In the following essay, Friedmann critiques Schreiner's novels *Undine*, *The Story of an African Farm*, and *From Man to Man*, highlighting the central theme of punishment in each work and linking Schreiner's picture of "painful experience" to events in her youth.]

### I. UNDINE

What one finds most interesting about the works of Olive Schreiner is the continual recurrence of certain material: she is preoccupied with painful experience.

This material is present in profusion in her first novel, *Undine*. *Undine* is undeniably poor stuff, but it deserves careful consideration. Although inferior to *An African Farm* it was written more or less at the same time as that novel, and it was Olive Schreiner's first expression at any length of something she went on trying to say for the rest of her life.

Never was heroine of fiction more ill-starred than Undine, whose life-story, from childhood, is the material of the novel.

The sub-title of the novel is: *A Queer Little Child*. Undine is a sensitive child, persistently misunderstood by members of her family. Orthodox Christianity is taught in the home, and the doctrine of the damnation of souls causes her the greatest misery. She cannot accept that God, who ordains that millions of souls go to destruction, can be good: He must be wicked and cruel. She is considered wicked by her family, and this view she shares. She is wretchedly aware that she is 'different', and while still very young (about ten years old) wishes that she were dead. Painfully she arrives at a belief that God—not the God of the Bible but a God she 'feels in her own soul'—will let nothing He has made be destroyed. At about the age of sixteen she is made miserable again by the chapel-goers in her guardian's circle: throughout this novel religion is associated with hypocrisy. She wonders at this stage whether it would 'be so, wherever she might go, that her hand should be against every man, and every man's hand against hers?'

Throughout her life she is misunderstood by the people with whom she comes in contact. For example, when she is suffering deeply in silence, she is thought a 'cold, dull, heartless, little creature'.

Chance pursues her relentlessly. She is jilted by the man she loves as a result of the activities of a mischief-maker; her child dies as soon as she begins to love it; an aunt to whom she is very attached becomes a snarl-

ing, insane creature. When Undine is in Africa, she accepts a lift to the Diamond Fields, and is persecuted by the wife of the owner of the wagon; practically destitute on her arrival there, she is robbed of her few possessions.

Chance is assisted by Undine herself. She marries a rich, repulsive, lecherous widower so that she may give money to his son Albert, who has jilted her. Albert marries an heiress and neither knows about nor needs her sacrifice. Everyone thinks she has married the old man for his money. She sticks to her side of the bargain, of course, with chill fidelity. When the old man dies, she gives all his money to his sons, and sets off for Africa with only ten pounds.

On board ship she slips half her total wealth into the portmanteau of a poor governess who has been ill-used by an elderly aunt, and thereafter, destitute and frequently on the verge of starvation, she seems to glory in giving away what little she has. She gives half her only crust of bread to a starving dog; she sells a diamond ring she has apparently kept throughout her poverty, and gives the proceeds anonymously, of course, to a young man to enable him to go back to England; money brought to her for ironing she gives to the servant who brings it.

Physical pain and suffering fall to her lot, too.

She writhes on the ground, like, says her creator, 'a crushed worm', when Albert jilts her, and she is bruised. She, who has given away a fortune, slaves over the irons so that she may eat. She crushes a rose in her hands until her fingers bleed, and they bleed again when she tries to earn a living by sewing. Dying, she drags herself along the ground, face downward in the dust.

The sympathetic characters have unenviable fates. Aunt Margaret's fiancé is drowned and Margaret goes mad; the governess, whom Undine meets on board ship, is rewarded after a hard drab life with a sight of the grave of the man she loves; Undine's only friend at the Diamond Fields, the sensitive child Diogenes, is paralysed as a result of a beating given her by her mother. Albert's mistress and the mother of his child, who—we are given to understand—is ennobled by her love for him, drowns herself when the child dies. The other baby in the novel—Undine's by her old husband—dies too.

The suffering is unskilfully contrived: the machinery creaks.

One last word before we leave *Undine*. The book is hag-ridden by what we might call the older-woman figure. She appears as Undine's unsympathetic mother, as a chapel-goer, as the governess's aunt, as the mother of