

THE FEMINIST AS ROMANTIC: SCHREINER'S LYNDALL AND THE ROMANCE PLOT

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One of the most puzzling aspects of the plot of Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* is the apparent capitulation of its heroine, Lyndall, to the dominant nineteenth-century constructions of femininity. When the novel was published in 1883, Lyndall was seen as the mouthpiece for the new push for women's rights. Despite the fact that the story has two protagonists, all the critical attention was centred on the heroine and her statements regarding women. These statements were especially harsh regarding the socialisation of women and girls, likening the process of gender enculturation to the practice of foot binding: "We fit our sphere as a Chinese woman's foot fits her shoe, exactly, as though God had made both—and yet He knows nothing of either" (Schreiner 189). *The Englishwomen's Review* of 1883 was content to quote large sections of the speech containing these sentiments, concentrating its quotations on women's desire to enter the professions and the inadequacies of female education as a preparation for motherhood ("Reviews" 362-64). Because of the stated opinions of its heroine, the book was regarded by many as some kind of feminist manifesto, as is clear from the comments of Mrs Huth Jackson. She recalled that while she was a student of Cheltenham Ladies' College, "girls smuggled in *African Farm*, then just out. The whole sky seemed aflame and many of us became violent feminists" (qtd Cruse 363).

However, in spite of her popular status as a proto-feminist, Lyndall's literary ends leave much to be desired if one is looking for a consistent feminist discourse in the work of Olive Schreiner. How does one account for the fact that having been the mouthpiece for one of the finest analyses of gender formation ever expressed, Lyndall seems to succumb abruptly to the very prescriptions she has outlined? And how is it that having demonstrated the double sexual standard, the immorality of the contemporary practice of marriage, and having opted for a "free union" instead, Lyndall still dies a slow death after the quick death of her illegitimate child? Such a death, while not presented as punitive by the narrator, is certainly presented as partially self-inflicted and bears a close resemblance to the fictional ends which have been reserved traditionally in literature for the "fallen woman." What drives Lyndall to this end? I believe she runs aground on the romance plot, and it is in her handling of this aspect of narrative that Schreiner demonstrates the ambiguity and complexity of her understanding of gender. Her position is shown to be a highly ambivalent one, as she explores not only the erotic appeal and potential of romance, but also its capacity to limit and entrap the heroine.

In *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre*, Goethe's prototypical *Bildungsroman*, the account of Wilhelm's *Bildung* comes to an end when he is about to marry Natalia, the perfect marriage being the sign of his adaptation to society and his guarantee of happiness. Throughout nineteenth-century fiction, marriage is *the* signal that the hero has reached the requisite level of maturity, providing closure to the narrative. In Schreiner's double *Bildungsroman*, *African Farm*, the reader might expect that a marriage would occur between those of suitable spiritual affinity to cap their development. Such a marriage would be expected to occur between Lyndall and Waldo: it is to Waldo that Lyndall opens

her heart, and Lyndall who becomes Waldo's focus. The narrative appears to set in motion plot devices which set up this possible romantic conclusion between Waldo and Lyndall. Their parallel developments at least offer spiritual unity, and at the Boer wedding, Lyndall tells Waldo:

“I like you so much, I love you.” She rested her cheek softly against his shoulder. “When I am with you I never know that I am a woman and 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 or not, they are mere bodies to me; but you are a spirit; I like you.” (210)

Likewise when Waldo writes his letter to Lyndall on his return to the farm, he has come to realise the unique place she has in his psyche. However, by this time, most of the plot developments hinted at earlier in the text have failed to materialise. When Waldo writes, “the back thought in my mind is always you,” the reader is by then dubious about any romantic conclusion to these longings (254). Though we are not yet privy to the fact that Lyndall is dead, we know she has gone off with her Stranger (he is never given a name), breaking the romantic codes and placing herself in the position of fallen woman. It is through this episode that Schreiner concertedly examines the contradictions of the romance plot for heroines. There is no marriage to cap this tale of development. The endorsement of society which marriage brings to the end of the usual *Bildungsroman* is not to be offered here; rather, the opposite will be true. The discourses of power which operate in this society are examined in all their ambivalence and found to be ultimately destructive to the individual.

As Lyndall makes clear in her statement to Waldo above, she has spent time with other men and they have been “mere bodies” to her (210). By the time her Stranger actually appears on the farm, the reader has been given enough information to realise that Lyndall is pregnant to one of these men. She has also pondered the responsibility of becoming a parent musing that “it must be a terrible thing to bring a human being into the world” (209). To clarify her condition, when Gregory the farm manager offers to serve her, asking nothing in return, she responds by asking him to marry her, saying “I want nothing more than your name” (232). However, the arrival of the Stranger forestalls this arrangement, and she leaves the farm with him instead, despite having refused *his* offer of marriage.

Lyndall's reasons for these actions are an expression of her highly ambivalent position regarding romance and sexuality, and have elicited plenty of critical interest, from the time of the novel's release to the present. D.F. Hannigan, writing on “The Artificiality of English Novels” in *The Westminster Review* of 1890, notes that:

Her refusal to marry the man she loves is in apparent contradiction to all our preconceived ideas concerning the sex. But this is a superficial view of the matter. Lyndall has never met a man whom she could love with all her soul. Therefore, though she is ready to surrender herself she refuses to sacrifice her moral freedom. (263-64)

This view is reiterated by the somewhat suspiciously named Thomas F. Husband in a highly feminist 1894 review of *African Farm*:

Marry him she will not, for she knows that marriage, where there is not love as well as passion, is not marriage. He is naught but her instrument, which she discards when she has used it—we are more familiar with the opposite case in the relation between the man and the woman. (633)

Crucial to these sympathetic responses to Lyndall's actions is the impact of the contemporary critique of the institution of marriage. *African Farm* had helped to bring this debate into popular circulation and by the 1890s it was difficult to pick up a journal which did not refer to it in some way. Lyndall's picture of marriage as a form of prostitution highlights its reduction to an economic exchange in which sex and full personhood are surrendered for keep and respectability.¹ She contrasts the higher possibilities of marriage with its common practice, stating: "Marriage for love is the beautifullest [sic] external symbol of the union of souls; marriage without it is the uncleanliest [sic] traffic that defiles the world" (190). While Lyndall does claim a love for her Stranger, she suggests that it is the wrong sort of love for marriage. His appeal is immediate, and physical, and as she informs him: "You call into activity one part of my nature; there is a higher part that you know nothing of, that you never touch. If I married you, afterwards it would arise and assert itself, and I should hate you always, as I do now sometimes" (237). However, while some early reviewers, such as those quoted, seemed quite sympathetic to Lyndall's distinctions (though just as many were shocked), more recent critics have generally been appalled at her choices.² What is the appeal of the Stranger, and why is she relatively powerless in his presence? How does she become entrapped by the romance plot, having been so insightful about the operations of gender in her society?

When Canon MacColl wrote his 1887 review of *African Farm*, he cited Calvinism as one of two factors which drove Schreiner "from her religious and moral moorings" (73). The other factor was "the difficulty which she finds in reconciling the facts of the world around her, and especially the injustice done to her own sex, with the doctrine of a God who is omnipotent, compassionate and just" (73). It is significant that MacColl links Schreiner's apprehension of gender issues to her crisis of faith, because the technique of using joint protagonists who are male and female would seem to allow for the neat separation of the issues of spirituality and gender. However, this reading ignores the explicit connection made by the narrator and Lyndall herself between the vacuum left by the absence of God and Lyndall's pursuit of self-destruction through romance. Lyndall's

¹ This idea had been explored by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* as "legal prostitution": "The phrase 'legal prostitution' was used in Defoe's *Conjugal Lewdness; or, Matrimonial Whoredom* (1727)" (Todd and Butler 129). It was a common enough concept by the 1890s to be rephrased as "monogamic prostitution" by W.T. Stead in his 1894 overview of New Woman fiction (Stead 65).

² For instance Canon MacColl noted: "We have heard the book described as 'immoral' and 'blasphemous,'" and a certain Anon from the *Church Quarterly Review* asked: "Are the details of such rotteness fit for commendation in a high-class English newspaper 'for all and sundry to read?'" (MacColl 73, Anon in Clayton 75). Modern feminist disapproval is probably best summarised by Elaine Showalter's dismissal of all of Schreiner's heroines: "Like Schreiner, they give up too easily and too soon" (203). Laurence Lerner questions the whole book's feminist reputation, and is particularly puzzled by Lyndall's rejection of her Stranger, finally asking in exasperation: "Why will she not marry?" (185).

embroilment in the romance plot follows her clear rejection of Christianity and the resultant grief this rejection brings. She is portrayed as being in a state of loss, unreconciled to the psychic isolation of post-Christian life: "I want to love! I want something great and pure to lift me to itself! . . . I am so cold, so hard, so hard; will no one help me?" (242) The Christian God may have been left behind, but salvation is still being sought. While Waldo's *Bildung* may contain the more complete account of loss of faith, this journey has been Lyndall's also, and her subsequent battering at the hands of the romance plot is predicated upon her having made it. Implicit in her progression from potential *Bildungs* hero to fallen heroine is the spiritual crisis of losing God, and finding nothing to fill the void other than the dominating lover.

The dynamics of the interaction between Lyndall and her Stranger in the cabin on the farm reflect a different Lyndall to the one we have seen up until this time. He begins by complaining about the fact that he is being hidden to disguise the realities of their relationship, insulting her in the process: "Your conscience is growing to have a certain virgin tenderness," he tells her (235). Both seem to accept the double sexual standard of the day, assuming that she is somehow less worthy than he as a consequence of their sexual relationship. She describes herself through his eyes as one who has "put herself into my power, and who has lost the right of meeting me on equal terms," as though this is a fact (238). When he asks why she loves him, she foregrounds the most disturbing aspects of the relationship in terms of her power of self-determination: "Because you are strong. You are the first man I ever was afraid of" (238). Only her last reason seems to empower her: "Because I like to experience, I like to try" (238). If his strength and her subsequent fear are the main source of attraction, there is a masochistic drive in Lyndall which we have not seen until now. This is where Lyndall's position *vis-à-vis* the romance plot is revealed in all its destructive ambivalence.

The partial resistance she puts up is treated by the Stranger as a kind of amusement, a new erotic entertainment. When she tells him why she cannot marry him, he refuses to respond to the content of what she says, choosing to continue to view her as a sexual object rather than as a person, with his comments: "I like you when you grow metaphysical and analytical," and "I like you when you get philosophical" (237). These are the statements of one supremely confident of his power. He can say what he likes knowing that he will still be able to enthrall her. Though she is able to analyse his motivations just as clearly as she has outlined the processes involved in the construction of gender, she still seems unable to analyse her own, and what they will mean for her. She recognises what drives him: "I have seen enough to tell me that you love me because you cannot bear to be resisted, and want to master me. You liked me at first because I treated you and all men with indifference. You resolved to have me because I seemed unattainable. That is all your love means" (238). In spite of her perception of his motivations, she is largely under his control. The narration bears out his confidence of this, recording that "it was certainly not in her power to resist him" (240). Lyndall's decision to keep something back by not marrying him is her only real point of resistance. Both of them regard marriage as some form of higher submission, as is shown when he finally pleads with her, "my darling . . . why will you not give yourself entirely to me?" (239). Though she is caught up in what she acknowledges as "madness," she is analytical enough to realise that it will pass, and that she will not want to find herself permanently in his power: "If I had been married to you for a year, I should have come to my senses, and seen that your hands and your voice are like the hands and the voice of any other man. I cannot quite see that now. But it is all

madness" (237). That marriage is seen as an irreversible loss of freedom is made clear by Lyndall when she tells him: "If once you have me you would hold me fast. I shall never be free again" (236).

Why this clearly unequal relationship has power over her at all is a question which has engrossed recent critics, especially those concerned with issues of gender. For example, Rachel Blau Du Plessis has said that Lyndall's "death is provoked by a conflict between her identity as a 'new woman' . . . and her already constituted psychic needs," claiming that "she is split between her sensual needs and her feminist ideals" (27). Kathleen Blake expresses her dismay by stating that "what is terrible is that Lyndall wants the kind of love that she distrusts" (214). Margaret Lenta also suggests a sort of self-division, "the absolute separation which she makes between sexual satisfaction and love is causing a split in her own personality" (43). One *can* see Lyndall's dilemma as an expression of her own individual personality. However, I believe Lyndall's choices and fictional ends are not just specific to herself, as a fictional heroine, but reveal much about the power of the romance script, especially for the woman of the nineteenth-century world.

Blake has noted that "the sexual energy of dominance and submission charges their scene together" (214). It should not be surprising that a nineteenth-century text figures the erotic in such terms. In a society such as that described by Lyndall, in which women are constructed to be sexual objects pleasing to men, the pattern of dominance and submission is being played out between genders in every sphere of life. Heterosexual relationships are virtually impossible outside of these patterns. Therefore, the dynamic of dominance and submission is built into all heterosexual contact. Lyndall is right to conclude that "when love is no more bought and sold, when it is not a means of making bread, when each woman's life is filled with earnest, independent labour, then love will come to her, a strange sudden sweetness breaking in upon her earnest work; not sought for, but found. Then, but not now" (195). It is only outside of this inequality that heterosexuality will be free of the dynamics of dominance and submission. While women are not without power, as Lyndall admits, it is of the covert, manipulative kind, legitimate power being denied them. The relationship between Waldo and Lyndall is spiritual, almost genderless, but it is not surprising that it remains unfulfilled. It is the alternative which cannot be realised in a society of institutionalised gender inequality. Instead, we are presented with the obviously flawed liaison between Lyndall and her Stranger in which inequality itself has become a source of the erotic. The hunter and hunted game they play is just a sexualised version of all gendered interaction around them. With no extant examples of equal heterosexual relationships, there are no other models. Power is sexy because sex always involves power.

The other function of this pattern is that it provides a way of negotiating Victorian codes regarding the sexual desires of women, which, in the middle-classes at least, were assumed to be negligible. If a woman is dominated, losing her power of volition, then she is no longer responsible for the desires evoked in the process. There is a fine line to this. Obviously, if a woman allows a man to "have his way with her," she is responsible, as Lyndall and her Stranger agree. However, having got to that point, if she then finds this to be sexually stimulating or fulfilling, she can be free of the assumption that she has inappropriate desires, because she has not done the initiating. The pattern of dominance and submission is thus a way of authorising a woman's sexuality, because her responses remain just that: responses. It should not be surprising then that Schreiner has created a scenario in which Lyndall's sexual desires are expressed in a relationship of obvious

inequality, in which fear and strength are the main source of erotic appeal for the heroine. This provides a means of negotiating the denial of women's sexuality, and is a reflection, if extreme, of all heterosexual relationships of the time. It is the expression of a narration which is both caught in the romance discourse, and critical of it. Just as Schreiner is deeply critical of Christianity, yet still keen to draw on the power of its discourse when it suits her, so she is shown to be equivocal about romance. That the romance script still has a deep appeal to women is evident today in the huge sales of the genre.³ Lyndall is not alone in her attraction to the fearful, powerful man. Her dilemmas are not just the private agonies of a particularly damaged psyche, as Du Plessis, Blake and Lenta seem to suggest. They are widely displayed conflicts which are experienced by large numbers of women today. When inequality becomes eroticised in a seemingly legitimised way, it is appealing. Unfortunately, despite its appeal, because of this inequality the romance plot always contains some element of the sado-masochistic.

Where Lyndall really departs from the script of her times is in rejecting the marriage contract, and it is this which is both her downfall and her gesture at independence. In this the text anticipates the New Woman novelists of the 1890s for whom marriage became a major preoccupation. Schreiner differs from many of these in that she does not feel the need to portray the potential husband as a monster in order to question the notion of marriage.⁴ Lyndall's critique of marriage has been constant, beginning with her comments to Em: "I am not in so great a hurry to put my neck beneath any man's foot; and I do not greatly admire the crying of babies" (184). In terms of plots for heroines, once she rejects marriage there tends to be only one other scenario. Susan Higgins, in what must be one of the earliest second-wave feminist responses to *African Farm*, points out that "having refused to submit to the subservient good-woman role, Lyndall is virtually forced into acting out the equally degrading bad-woman opposite," the end of which is, of course, death (22). While in most nineteenth-century fiction the death of the fallen woman is punitive, Lyndall's death is both lovingly depicted and illustrative of Victorian gender codes. It further demonstrates the way in which this plot both resists and conforms to nineteenth-century narrative patterns.

Margaret Daymond claims that Lyndall "finds her options concentrated in just one combat: that with her stranger over the question of a woman's freedom in a relationship" (178). This is also the understanding of the Stranger himself, when, after the death of the baby, he again proposes marriage: "I have learnt to love you more wisely, more tenderly than of old; you shall have perfect freedom. Lyndall, grand little woman, for your own sake be my wife!" (278). However, once again Lyndall rejects the offer, despite the promise of freedom. She foregrounds two other factors, the first of which is the quality of love she has for him: "I cannot be bound to one whom I love as I love you" (279). The second is related to her quest for vocation, but seems more metaphysical or religious in nature, as she writes to him of her dream that "one day—perhaps it may be far off—I shall find what I have wanted all my life; something nobler, stronger than I, before which I can kneel down. You lose nothing by not having me now; I am a weak, selfish, erring woman.

³ For an overview of the popular romance genre and Harlequin Publishers which produces much of it, see Ann Barr Snitow's "Mass Market Romance," in which she discusses the erotic appeal of the contemporary romance genre.

⁴ Overviews of this fiction, and the way it deals with the subject of marriage, can be found in Boumelha (Chap 4) and Bland.

One day I shall find something to worship, and then I shall be—" (279). Though she has succumbed to his other attractions, the Stranger does not offer the possibility of spiritual union so she will not attach herself to him permanently.

In *The Story of an African Farm*, Lyndall's *Bildung* is truncated by her ambivalence regarding romance. She critiques the romance plot to the point that she will not carry it through to its traditional outcome: marriage. However, the erotic appeal of both the Stranger and the dynamics of their relationship means that she will nevertheless fall victim to it. Having rejected marriage, however worthy her reasons, she is only left with the role of the fallen woman. After giving birth and seeing her baby die, she deliberately exposes herself to the elements and seems to induce a slow suicide. The "free union" she has pursued with her lover has not provided any real alternative to the constrictions of marriage. She begins as hero, but finishes as heroine, ultimately choosing the role that the romance plot thrusts upon her. Du Plessis sees her as caught between the two: "to be split between the hero, doing something for the world, and the heroine, waiting to be awakened, to be split between delivered and deliverer, is Lyndall's stalemate between romance and vocation" (27). But in terms of narrative denouement, she cannot remain there. Whatever the start of her journey promises, it finishes with Lyndall as nineteenth-century heroine, however subversively she may play the role. Schreiner's puzzling ambiguity with regard to romance and the marital plot should not really surprise us. The text functions both within and outside the discourse of romance, both resisting and complying. Teresa De Lauretis has stated that "the movement in and out of gender as ideological representation . . . characterizes the subject of feminism" (26). Envisaging the representation of gender as a topographical space, De Lauretis has argued that there is a space within the "male-centered frame of reference," and a space outside, and that these two kinds of spaces "exist concurrently and in contradiction" (26). *African Farm* then, rather than being unusual in being caught within and outside various discourses, typifies the state of feminism: "To inhabit both kinds of spaces at once is to live the contradiction which . . . is the condition of feminism" (De Lauretis 26). The contradictory progress of Lyndall's narrative can be seen as an extreme expression of this condition.

The other commentary the text provides on the construction of gender is through the presence of Gregory Rose. Gregory's character is one in transition, and so it is contradictory in many respects. Gregory's vacillation is between traditional gender roles, and it is notable that even his character seems transformed when he is wearing women's clothes. He is not the only one affected: the narrator immediately shifts from the ironic tone and presents us with a Gregory who is to be taken seriously, even admired. Gerard Monsman suggests that "Gregory's clothes-as-symbol are paradoxically an unveiling of the inner self" (263). Lyndall also claims a conventionally feminine nature for Gregory, though the reader at this stage is not presented with any evidence to support the view, other than his preoccupation with gender boundaries: "'There,' said Lyndall, 'goes a true woman—one born for the sphere that some women have to fill without being born for it. How happy he would be sewing frills into his little girls' frocks, and how pretty he would look sitting in a parlour, with a rough man making love to him!'" (197). Lyndall is careful to point out that though some women have to fulfill this role, they are not "born for it." She maintains her stance that gender roles are not intrinsic, but learned and enforced. Gregory thus becomes a symbol of the restriction these roles place upon males, just as Lyndall demonstrates the restrictions on females.

That gender is a vital aspect of personal identity is shown when Gregory addresses the sky, saying, "am I, am I Gregory Nazianzen Rose?" (270). When roles are so limited that there is only one way of being male, and one way of being female, Gregory actually has to assume another gender in order to act out a different role. In doing this, he puts his very identity into doubt. The character transformation could not be more complete. From being an immature, self-absorbed and arrogant young man, Gregory becomes a mature, sensible, caring and serving "woman." He becomes a living demonstration of the kind of love Lyndall is looking for, when she says "one day I will love something utterly, and then I will be better," and "happiness is a great love and much serving" (242, 280). His love for her transforms him to the point that he is now able to serve, an ability we have seen no evidence of till then. It also causes him to abandon his insistence on male domination: "He had forgotten that it is man's right to rule" (245). This is one of the reasons he is named after fourth-century Saint Gregory Nazianzen or Nazianzus, and perhaps the most relevant one. *Any* saint would have done, the point being that the life of service is considered a saintly one. He becomes, to Lyndall at least, Saint Gregory. He also shows the positive aspects of the woman's traditional role of service, in that it fills society's needs for care and tenderness. His maleness shows these roles need not be confined to women.

However, the limitations of his service which is a form of worship are also demonstrated, as the human idol is always mortal. The transforming power of his love for Lyndall is only able to sustain him when she is alive. After her death, he returns to the farm and to the male role, though apparently without his earlier arrogance. There is also something inherently unbalanced about his relationship with Lyndall. Once again, the domination/submission model is apparent, though this time the woman is dominant. The ultimate demonstration of this is in Lyndall's dying command that Gregory marry Em. The reader wonders what right Lyndall has to order the affairs of others, especially when she has played a role in destroying Em's aspirations. In this text women never find solidarity in each other and therefore there can be no vision of feminist community. They seem rather to restrict each other, as Tant' Sannie does to Em and Lyndall, and the finishing school teachers do to Lyndall. Lyndall, if inadvertently, does this to Em by attracting Gregory, and caps it by assuming she knows best with regard to Em's future. One might prefer that Em refuse Gregory and show some sign of self-assertion, but she remains resigned though profoundly disappointed.

Perhaps this aspect of the narrative is the final demonstration of the emptiness of the romance plot, as we *are* left with a couple at the end of this text. They are young, and are about to marry, but both are deeply disappointed with the whole idea of romantic fulfilment. Em has to marry one who no longer loves her, and Gregory comes back to a life in which Lyndall is absent, and his caring "woman's" role is no longer possible. The romance plot, robbed of its content, is almost a burden to them rather than a fulfilment. As the consummation of the narrative, it is empty, and is evidence of Schreiner's final rejection of romance conventions. In Schreiner's bleak depiction of the African karroo, gender roles can be resisted for a time, but ultimately triumph over the individual. Lyndall can refuse marriage, but dies in isolation; Gregory can explore the "feminine" side of his identity, yet must return to the conventional male role and a joyless marriage: romance fulfils no one.

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