**Contributor: Nicholas Meihuizen**

**Entry: Schreiner, Olive (1855-1920)**

Well-read in Herbert Spencer’s *First Principles* (1862), Darwin, Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Stuart Mill, Schreiner, the daughter of a Wesleyan missionary, was an independent thinker, critical of the narrow-minded Victorian attitudes especially noticeable in the colonies. Her writings (fictional and polemical) explore women’s liberation, miscegenation, and the dislocation and alienation of blacks and whites. Subsequent South African authors, such as William Plomer, Pauline Smith, Alan Paton, Dan Jacobson, and Nadine Gordimer, show signs of her influence. She also proved inspirational for Afrikaans writer Karl Schoeman and black writer Richard Rive. While working as a governess on a Karoo farm she wrote her best known book, *The Story of an African Farm*, first published in 1883. The book, though realist in nature, is certainly of a syncretic, experimental cast, confirming early on in the history of South African letters the appearance of important aspects of local Modernism. It contains long philosophical passages, with polemical views on the educational and professional constraints imposed upon women. (It was only in 1930, ten years after her death, that white South African women gained the right to vote.) The workings of a malignant fate in the novel parallel a major preoccupation in Thomas Hardy’s oeuvre; she might have been familiar with an early work such as *Far from the Madding Crowd*, which was first published in 1874. Whatever the case, the emphasis in her book on the circumscriptive power of existence can be seen as a response to the withdrawal of meaningful spirituality from contemporary life.

Schreiner’s syncretism also drew on the ‘prophetic dream’ topos derived from the Bible and evangelical literature, as well as Scottish-South African writer Thomas Pringle’s ‘A Midday Dream’ (1826), a political allegory in the mould of Shelley’s ‘Masque of Anarchy’. The topos manifested itself in *Dreams* (1890) and *Dream Life and Real Life* (1893). French symbolism and the socialist work of William Morris are also apparent in the background of these works. The allegories within them pertain to issues in the ‘real world’, such as the lot of women, and how it might be improved. These books are related to her nonfictional *Women and Labour* (1911), where Schreiner argues for the economic autonomy of women in the face of prevailing social structures based on dependency and the denial of opportunity in education and labour.

Other books of note include her unfinished lifework, *From Man to Man* (1926), published posthumously. Here, too, she expresses her concern for the position of women in society, but there is a softness of tone and feeling, and less of an emphasis on cruel fate, than in *The Story of an African Farm*. A slighter work is *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897), though Schreiner was proud of it, which, through allegorical means involving an unrecognized Christ figure, criticized the policies and activities of her one-time hero, Cecil John Rhodes.

**References and further reading**

Beckman, J.A. (1989) *The Healing Imagination of Olive Schreiner: Beyond South African Colonialism*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

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Friedmann, M.V. (1955) *Olive Schreiner: A Study in Latent Meanings*, Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.

Monsman, G.C. (1991) *Olive Schreiner’s Fiction: Landscape and Power*, Piscataway: Rutgers University Press.

Schoeman, K. (1991) *Olive Schreiner: A Woman in South Africa, 1855-1881*, Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball.

**List of works**

*The Story of an African Farm* (1883)

*Dreams* (1890)

*Dream Life and Real Life* (1893)

*Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897)

*Women and Labour* (1911)

*From Man to Man* (1926)