**Contributor: Nicholas Meihuizen**

**Entry: Smith, Pauline (Janet) (1882-1959)**

Pauline Smith was born in Oudtshoorn, in the Little Karoo. Her beloved father, who was the first resident physician of the area, died when she was sixteen, after she had been sent to boarding school in Scotland. Memories of the landscape and people of the Little Karoo remained with her throughout her life, though she spent most of her life from 1895 onward in Britain and Europe. She developed a close friendship with Arnold Bennett, who helped her establish herself as a writer, giving her guidance and encouragement, being infallible in his perception of her strong points as a writer.

Her reputation rests on a small body of writing, the short novel, *The Beadle*, and the collections of short-stories, *The Little Karoo*, and *Platkops Children*. She, like Olive Schreiner, had a deep empathy for her Boer subjects, the victims of British Imperialism, but, unlike Schreiner, was not didactic in her portrayal of people and situations. Her writings might be seen from an Adornian perspective, as bearing within their apparent isolation from, and disregard for, the socio-political realities of the South African situation, a valorisation of human values in the face of the rampant materialism in the newly industrialised South Africa.

Smith’s naturalism is replete with her own characteristic style, a style based on her contextualisation of rural life within an Afrikaner linguistic and perceptual frame, and which is thus undeniably artificial (even idealised), yet existentially and psychologically true. Her stories make extended use of first person dialogue, and do so in a way that is meant to suggest the first language of its speakers, Afrikaans. This is done through semantic and, especially, syntactic means. The effect of this is not only to convey the sense of a different language, but also a different conceptual means of interacting with the world, through a type of defamiliarisation. Semantically the vocabulary in her dialogues is simple and depends in large part on emphatic monosyllabic words, and syntactically its structure is (from an English point-of-view) archaic — its inversions suggest the English of the King James Bible. Her characterisation of the Afrikaner psyche is sympathetic and deep, if also impressionistic. The resulting picture is not a caricature, however, but tells (perhaps like the writing of Willa Cather) of the primitive strength of a people isolated from the modern world. There are also darker aspects to this world, carefully probed by Smith in her short-stories, which temper the idealisation apparent in *The Beadle*. She was, like Jane Austen, aware that her gift was confined to a limited area of expression and understanding, which nevertheless contained wider resonances pertaining to human nature. Her aestheticization of a world deliberately cordoned off from modernity (set in a past time, in an isolated place) makes her approach almost mythical, and thus suffused with a presence that is not conditioned by historical contingency. In writing in this way, she was ‘making new’ an approach to local experience.

Her writing was admired by Herman Charles Bosman, who, in his short stories, also rendered his dialogues in a type of English that followed Afrikaans syntactic patterns.

**References and further reading**

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**List of works**

*The Little Karoo* (1925)

*The Beadle* (1926)

*Platkops Children* (1936)