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A Brief Introduction to Olive Schreiner
by Dorothy Driver

This feature essay is written by Dr Dorothy Driver, a preeminent literary critic and Emeritus Professor at the University of Cape Town whose work has shaped modern southern African literary thinking. Her extensive academic career spans over forty years of research into women's writing across the African continent, and she is recognized as one of the foremost authorities on the life, letters, and manuscripts of Olive Schreiner. Her outstanding contributions to Schreiner studies include transcribing fragile primary texts for the University of Cape Town's digital archives, as well as editing the definitive edition of Schreiner's posthumous masterpiece, *From Man to Man*.

Dr Driver and Amazwi share a long history. In 2019 Amazwi published her illustrated book, *Olive Schreiner's Poetics of Plants*, which was launched at the museum. She kindly agreed to write this introductory essay on the life and work of Olive Schreiner as part of Amazwi's relaunch of the Olive Schreiner House Museum in Nxuba (formerly Cradock), which features new exhibitions, upgrades to infrastructure to ensure the conservation of the house (itself a heritage building) and the heritage items it contains, and upgrades to the adjacent Ikhamanga Hall to enhance its utility for the communities of Nxuba. Amazwi extends heartfelt thanks to Dr Driver for agreeing to write this essay.

As a child, Olive Schreiner rejected the Protestant Christianity of her missionary parents, speaking later of having had her first true religious experience at the age of five with intimations of a profound unity underlying all things, "that they were alive, & that I was part of them."[1] And when "not yet nine years old," she recalls, her heart became "burning and heavy" at the thought of the suffering of "dark-men [killed] in my native country [and] their lands taken from them by white-men, armed with superior weapons; even near to me such things happened".[2]

[1] Letter to John T. Lloyd, 29 October 1892, *Olive Schreiner Letters Online.*

[2] These quotations are drawn from Olive Schreiner, "The Dawn of Civilisation: Stray thoughts on Peace and War; The homely personal confession of a believer in Human Unity," in *Olive Schreiner's The Dawn of Civilisation & Other Unpublished Wartime Writings*, 40 and 41. See also, in a slightly different version, "The Dawn of Civilisation", in Stephen Gray, ed., *Words in Season* (London: Penguin, 2005), 209. The former was drawn from Schreiner's manuscripts held at the Harry Ransom Center (Austin, Texas), partly reproduced in typescripts held at the National Library of South Africa (Cape Town). The latter was drawn from the edited and published version in *The Nation and Atheneum*, 26 March 1921.

Distraught, too, at the thought of the hunting ("the pleasure of killing") of birds and animals, "I seemed to *see* a world in which creatures were no more hated and crushed, in which the strong helped the weak, and men [she meant all human beings] understood each other, and forgave each other, and did not try to crush each other but to help."[3] Out of such moments was her own mission born: a mission to "*strive* to make [what] you hunger for real!"[4]

This mission depended first on extinguishing from her own psyche any "primitive self-seeking instincts [of] human nature,"[5] and then on helping create an "enlarged and expanded humanity [of] whatsoever race, class and nation".[6] Her interest was not in eradicating difference, but in working across it in mutual sympathy and support. Schreiner abhorred the way many progressive thinkers re-routed Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory into Social Darwinism, thus valorising competition (in Schreiner's terms, "brute force") rather than cooperation and care, which Schreiner conceptualised as "mother-love" and which she determinedly de-gendered. For Schreiner, men were the creators of children as much as were women, and should be equally responsible in matters of familial care and social compassion. Whereas progressive late nineteenth-century thinking focused primarily on ameliorating the social position of women, her concern was in the evolution of both women and men – what we would now call the social construction and re-construction of gender.

Schreiner's fiction and non-fiction, published in Britain and the United States and quite widely translated, has given her a manifold reputation as South Africa's first novelist and precursor of Britain's "New Woman" literary tradition; as a precocious colonial feminist, and as a bold, free-thinking socialist and anti-imperialist. Her writing, nonetheless, is marked by certain unthinking conformities in her racial and ethnic representations which persist disturbingly late in her published fiction. In spite of this, however, there are many indications in her correspondence and her political essays – including some noticeable late-life adjustments in her fiction – of an increasing struggle with "race [as] not only South Africa's great question, but the world's great question,"[7] one intimately bound up with the question, "What does it mean to be human?"

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[3] Schreiner, "The Dawn of Civilisation," 41 and 42. See also Gray, ed., *Words in Season*, 210 and 211.

[4] Olive Schreiner, "The Dawn of Civilisation," 43. See also Gray, ed., *Words in Season*, 212.

[5] Olive Schreiner, "The Dawn of Civilisation: Stray thoughts on Peace and War; The homely personal confession of a believer in Human Unity," in *Olive Schreiner's The Dawn of Civilisation & Other Unpublished Wartime Writings*, 44. See also Stephen Gray, ed., *Words in Season*, 213.

[6] Schreiner, *Woman and Labour* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1911), 128.

[7] Schreiner, Letter to Jan Smuts, 19 October 1920, *OSLO*; see also Stanley and Salter, eds., *The World's Great Question: Olive Schreiner's South African Letters 1889-1920* (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 2014), 367.

Paying tribute to her on the centenary of her birth, Michael Harmel – one of the founders of the Congress of Democrats, and later singled out by Nelson Mandela as "a key figure in the underground Communist Party"[8] – called Schreiner "a revolutionary by nature and intellectual conviction," and praised her last novel, *From Man to Man*, as "her finest work and the greatest achievement of South African literature".[9] He did, however, add a caveat: future editions of her works should replace an unintentionally but particularly offensive racial label with a more acceptable term.[10]

In the early years of the twentieth century, figures such as Sol T. Plaatje and Mohandas Gandhi treated Schreiner as friend and political ally, and her writing was widely hailed. In 1962, Es'kia Mphahlele in *The African Image* distinguished her fiction from virtually all other white South African writing, which – he said – confined itself to endless grappling with "the immediate problem of race-relations to the exclusion of any reference to a universal context". To him, Schreiner alone was capable of portraying her black characters as "an organic part of the setting".[11] Richard Rive, too, was an admirer, devoting his Oxford University doctoral dissertation (1974) to her and later editing her letters, as was Ruth First, who co-authored a biography in 1980.[12] More recently, though baulking at the racialised stereotypes in *The Story of an African Farm*, the novelist Lauretta Ngcobo hailed the political essays (*Thoughts on South Africa* and *Closer Union*) as the work of a "giant great crusader [who] strides immortal over a chaotic South Africa, pointing and piloting the way to a greater South Africa".[13] Neville Alexander, a prominent anti-Apartheid activist, named his final set of essays after Schreiner's *Thoughts on the New South Africa* (2013).

Such responses suggest that the multifarious, always emerging / always contested nature of a South African literary tradition may now productively be seen as more profoundly and

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Stanley and Salter's introduction and their headnotes to the book's chronologically arranged sections provide invaluable contextualisation for Schreiner's shift from acknowledging "race" as South Africa's "great question" to seeing it as "the world's great question".

[8] Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (London: Abacus, 1995), 334.

[9] Michael Harmel, *Olive Schreiner, 1855–1955* (Cape Town: Real Publishing, 1955), 7 and 3.

[10] Harmel, *Olive Schreiner,* 5 n. His 12-page centenary booklet reprints the following four essays, slightly adapting their telling titles: "Olive Schreiner, South Africa's Greatest Creative Writer"; "Olive Schreiner – Fearless Fighter Against Injustice"; "Olive Schreiner's deeply sensitive and sympathetic nature . . ."; and "Olive Schreiner's Writings are Part of the Inheritance of South Africa"; first published in *New Age* 1, no. 18 (24 February 1955): 7; *New Age* 1, no. 20 (10 March 1995): 7; *New Age* 1, no. 21 (17 March 1955): 6; and *New Age* 1, no. 22 (24 March 1955): 7, respectively.

[11] Ezekiel Mphahlele, *The African Image* (New York: Praeger, 1962), 92; 121 and 131.

[12] See Richard Rive, ed., *Olive Schreiner, Letters 1871-99* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1987); and Ruth First and Ann Scott, *Olive Schreiner* (New York: Schocken Books, 1980).

[13] Lauretta Ngcobo, "A Black South African Woman Writing Long After Schreiner," in Itala Vivan, ed., *The Flawed Diamond: Essays on Olive Schreine*r (Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1991), 189.

more expansively shaped by Schreiner's writing than has hitherto been the case. Bessie Head, for instance, enjoyed being called Schreiner's "reincarnation"; despite certain misgivings, she felt they shared a "huge and generous view of life," even what we may call a certain "nobility" as social visionaries, given Head's stated desire that "more than anything I want to be noble".[14] And the Eastern Cape history represented in Mputhumi Ntabeni's first novel, *The Broken River Tent* (2018), may read all the more powerfully for the advance it makes on Schreiner's more limited historical vision.

In relation simply to the tradition of white South African writing, Schreiner's vivid representations of the Karoo landscape and farming community have been seen to set the South African farm novel on its course. But Mphahlele's dual reference to her black characters ("an organic part of the setting") and the expanded focus of her writing ("universal context") brings to mind a more complex relation between character and environment than the farm novel tradition makes visible. Had Mphahlele referred to her political essays (his stated focus was fiction), his line on her would have been further encouraged by her desire for South Africa – *her* South Africa, not the kind of country that British capitalist imperialism was intent on forging – to serve as a model for the wider world: "a fairer and more healthful form of civilization than has elsewhere been reached".[15] The Boer way of life almost served her as a model, given its strong rural ethos and its rejection of capitalism, but she saw it as invalidated by endemic racism. Instead, she esteemed the "solid social matrix" characteristic of the "Bantu" before they were "severed from [the] tribal organization with which all [their] most heroic virtues are connected".[16] She recommended the development by white South African society of a similar ethos of communality and hospitality. "With wisdom and patient justice," she said, whites needed to transfer this ethos "to our own larger society".[17]

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[14] See, respectively, "Bessie Head: Interviewed by Michelle Adler, Susan Gardner, Tobeka Mda and Patricia Sandler—Serowe, 5 January 1983," in Craig MacKenzie and Cherry Clayton, eds., *Between the Lines: Interviews with Bessie Head, Sheila Roberts, Ellen Kuzwayo, Miriam Tlali* (Grahamstown: National English Literary Museum, 1989), 17; and Betty McGinnis Fradkin, "Conversations with Bessie," *World Literature Written in English* 17, 2 (1978), 433. For further discussion, see Dorothy Driver, "Passing it On: Olive Schreiner and Bessie Head" in Jade Munslow Ong and Andrew van der Vlies, eds., *Olive Schreiner: Writing Networks and Global Contexts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024), 269-294; and "Re-reading, Rewriting: Olive Schreiner and Bessie Head," *English Academy Review* 42. 2 (2025), 67-84, published online 2026: doi.org/10.1080/10131752.2025.2601395.

[15] Schreiner, "The Psychology of the Boer," *Thoughts on South Africa* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1923), 272.

[16] Schreiner, "The Problem of Slavery," *Thoughts on South Africa*, 128.

[17] Schreiner, *Closer Union* (Cape Town: The Constitutional Reform Association; London: Fifield, 1909), 27; see also Gray, ed., *Words in Season*, 182. For fuller discussion of Schreiner's racial attitudes, see the following four essays in Ong and van der Vlies, eds., *Olive Schreiner*: Barnita Bagchi, "Olive Schreiner and C. F. Andrews: Utopia and Paths to Anti-Racism and Decolonisation," 85-98; Liz Stanley, "Turning Points: Olive Schreiner Changing Her Mind About Race Matters," 99-114; Janet Remmington, "Olive Schreiner, Race and

Schreiner's vision of a social ideal – her vision of an "enlarged and expanded humanity" of "whatsoever race, class and nation" – is deeply cognisant of the historical environment, both material and discursive, that would constrain it. For instance, the way in which *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) comes to an end indicates that the British Cape Colony of the late nineteenth century is clearly not yet ready for pioneering thinkers like Lyndall and Waldo. Her allegorical novella, *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897), shows Cecil John Rhodes's invasion and slaughter as a key example of the kind of primitive "brute force" that was deaf to what Christian civilisation at least purported to hold dear. Her later writing – the polemical *Woman and Labour* (1911) and her unfinished, posthumous novel *From Man to Man* (1926) – suggests in different ways her disquiet regarding white middle-class women's entrenchment in, and complicity with, their own and other women's subordination. But these later texts also show that she saw, in the position of pre-colonial African women and working-class women, the possibilities of an alternative historical trajectory: a new starting point or point of departure.[18]

Schreiner's bedrock feminism combines powerfully with her anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism and anti-racism. She would have been, as Harmel implies (his hagiographic tendency notwithstanding), a powerful anti-Apartheid force had she lived that long. As it is, she leaves us free to judge her in her own times, as surely she would have judged us in our own.

The environmental implications of Schreiner's vision or mission are evident in their own way in her descriptions and naming of plants. The leaves and branches of her shrubs and trees, whether indigenous or naturalised, reflect or reach for the ideal; this gives to her setting a spiritual quality that easily reads as African, or perhaps specifically pre-colonial African. Schreiner's source is the Platonic ideal. For her, humans are imprinted, like plants, with an ideal destiny *in potentio*, a possible perfection. Waldo not only learns from a localised nature but is said to be "like a thorn-tree, which grows up very quietly, without anyone's caring for it, and one day suddenly breaks out into yellow blossoms."[19] *From Man to Man* – revised after Schreiner returned to her homeland after a decade spent in Europe – shows a determined redirection in her thinking: plant descriptions that recognise African knowledge systems before European invasion; plant names that signal the heterogeneity of the country's population. Schreiner's earlier writing had made figurative use of moonlight to

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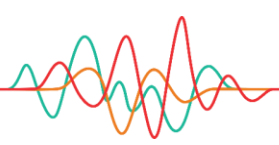
Black South Africa: #RhodesMustFall and a 'Prophetic Vision of the Future'," 115-37; and Heidi Barends, "The Influence of Olive Schreiner on Howard Thurman and, through Thurman, on Martin Luther King, Jr.," 138-154.

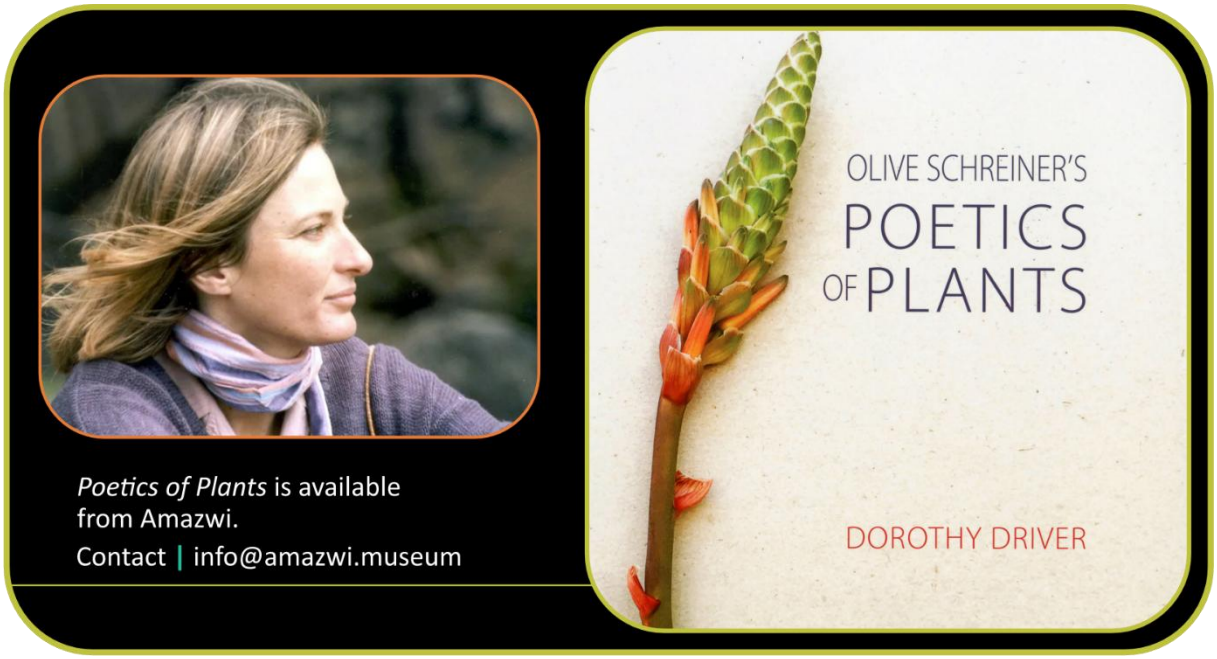
[18] For further discussion in this regard, see Dorothy Driver, Introduction, *From Man to Man or Perhaps Only—* by Olive Schreiner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025), ix-lxii.

[19] Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 231.



develop the conceit of plants reflecting or reaching for the ideal, but *From Man to Man* substitutes sunlight, and specifically African sunlight, as the sign of her ideal – an "enlarged and expanded humanity" – in the process of growth or regeneration, as if saying to herself that here, in this country, what "you hunger for" is now closer to the "real". [20]

Schreiner's poetics of plants allows the land itself to speak, not simply of the ideal as it strives to become real, not simply of the entanglements of histories, perspectives, positions and struggles, but also of the indefinable power that surges from it, evincing its beauty, its energy, and its resilience. Sometimes the plants show resistance; sometimes they offer protection or care. With regard to these poetics, readers may wish to consider Schreiner as an ever-emerging African writer, or simply to regard her poetics of plants as a timely corrective at a moment in history when the connections between the human inhabitants of our planet and its flora seem to be breaking down.



[20] For fuller discussion, see Dorothy Driver, *Olive Schreiner's Poetics of Plants* (Makhanda: Amazwi South African Museum of Literature, 2019).

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