

“Why Was It We Went Out of the Church?”:
Night, Day, and Religious Space in Olive Schreiner’s
The Story of an African Farm

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Undeniably explosive in nature, Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) shook Victorian gender boundaries, contributing to the growing literary and historical phenomenon of the “new woman,” while similarly testing the status quo in colonialism, religion, and even narrative form. In terms of the novel’s religious stance, Schreiner uses her characters to explicitly voice arguments for atheism and pagan pantheism. With geographic and temporal agents, Schreiner explores spirituality by situating her characters against an eternity of landscape that renders them infinitesimal. In an even stranger fracture of Victorian religious conventions, the characters in *The Story of an African Farm* perform unexpected spiritual roles that simultaneously subvert and confirm Victorian expectations of night and day; night is sacred, loaded with holy interactions, whereas day (in particular Sunday as its Christian exemplar) becomes secular, a place for drudgery, sin, and suffering. These divided realms of experience address the pantheist, evangelical, and secularizing fault-lines of the Victorian religious climate.

In *The Story of an African Farm*, Waldo’s character reinstates a Christian continuity at risk in the Victorian era. To cite just one example of the effects of science upon religious matters, “in Geology. The belief in divine interference in nature—in miraculous catastrophic interventions in the history of life and the history of earth—was brought into question” (Young 15). Waldo does not reject this perspective on geology as a brute, indifferent process—one that leaves the seemingly eternal landscape looming large over the characters—instead, he takes an unexpected route to spiritual confirmation. He recognizes the physical world as spiritually com-

municative in a pagan context, largely through his interactions with moonlight and the stars. In the opening pages, a strange personification of the moon brings it into direct contact with Waldo, Lyndall, and Emily. Hannah Freeman points out that “the moonlight is the active subject in nearly every sentence” (22). The children belong to the moon, it pours “down its light,” falls “in a flood,” looks “in at the naked little limbs” (1–2). Most tellingly, the moon is aligned with a forgiving deity: “the loving moon hid defects here as elsewhere” (2). Waldo’s literal dialogue with the stars even more powerfully enacts this belief in the divine attributes of nature; they tell Waldo that they “are as old as the Unknown” (87). The stars’ effect on Waldo is not explicitly Christian, but their placement in a “regal night” (86) still gestures to their religious authority.

Later, Lyndall and Waldo share confidence that the night holds potential as a theatre of religious experience. Lyndall begins, pointing to the stars: “we are talking of tomorrow and tomorrow, and our hearts are so strong; we are not thinking of something that can touch us softly in the dark and make us still forever. They are laughing at us Waldo” (185). This is the very effect that the stars have had on Waldo before, as earlier in the novel they ridiculed his search for meaning. To this he replies tellingly, “Do you ever pray?” When she answers no, he carries on,

I never do; but I might when I look up there.... If there were a wall of rock on the edge of a world, and one rock stretched out far, far into space, and I stood alone upon it, alone, with stars above me, and stars below me, I would not say anything; but the feeling would be prayer. (185)

Waldo seeks to express fully the mysterious faith that night seems to communicate and embody. For Waldo and his sympathizers in the novel, an estrangement from prayer is symptomatic of a greater

disinterest in faith; the powerful presence of night calls up the unknown and sacred space that has ceased to exist in the Church, the experience of churchgoing having undergone erosion in Victorian culture.

The Story of an African Farm was timely in its address of spiritual issues: the readership it found in London was one that was lurching into new conceptions of the sacred and secular world. In terms of the British experience, in the *fin de siècle* “many more people did not go to church or chapel than in the early”; while this was essentially because “the country was far more populous,” it still created the effect of “Victorian ‘secularization’” (Chadwick 94). The social predominance of the Church was also under threat from the secular influences of industrialization and evolutionary theory. The religious culture remained prominent and active, however, and for the greater part of the nineteenth century, “public observation of religion was so widespread” that distinctions were usually not between Christian or non-Christian, but between “denominational allegiance or theological preference[s]” (Baigent 35). This institutionalization of religion led it to take on functions and connotations beyond the spiritual, often serving as “a cloak of respectability” for campaigners with secular agendas (Baigent 41). Such secularization of religious practice served to push it away from a place of spiritual predominance in many areas of late Victorian life.

In *The Story of An African Farm*, Tant’ Sannie embodies this secularized shift as overseer of the farm. Significantly, Tant’ Sannie’s action in the plot occurs only during the daylight hours on the farm; she sleeps and dreams as important spiritual events unfold, such as the death of Otto. Her pragmatic character will not suffer the inconvenience of losing sleep when she has servants to do her bidding. Tant’ Sannie builds her foundation on religious concerns, but her religiosity enacts itself through received artificial forms and

literalist Biblical interpretation. Though a yeoman farmer, Tant' Sannie represents the familiar privileged class who can afford to be rigidly Christian; she has none of the "fluidity of religious position ... characteristic of the working class" in the Victorian era (McLeod 248). Indeed, Schreiner presents her as an embodiment of the "church-going classes" in a time when "the prevailing religion began to appear as hypocrisy and cant, its daily and weekly rituals merely embarrassing" (McLeod 284). Tant' Sannie views her religious duties much as she views her operation of the farm: a program following the rising and setting of the sun. "Ignorant, sheltered, and complacent, Tant' Sannie relies on unexamined superstition and religiosity ... meanwhile abusing the children for their inquisitive personalities and desire for knowledge" (Freeman 24). She reflects the anxiety that "the general observance of Sunday, imposed if necessary by force" was an empty practice and one that eroded actual spiritual awareness (McLeod 221). The reader only too clearly recognizes this paralyzing structure and how it undermines religious practice in Waldo's narrative, and it mirrors the gradual destruction of faith seen in the "Times and Seasons" episode. The embodiment of religious practice in the institutionalized "day" of worship has failed with Tant' Sannie, who has brought it into the structure of not only the secular, but of the oppressive.

In Victorian times, secularization also generated reactive, sensational forums to combat marginalization in the social sphere, as evidenced by the great vogue of Evangelical Christianity: "Suffering no perceptible check until the middle or later years of the nineteenth century ... Evangelicalism was largely lay and anticlerical in character.... Its leadership was as socially varied as its rank and file; and its energies were entirely unpredictable" (Best 37). Bonaparte Blenkins, the second despot to terrorize the farm, personifies this volatile, secularizing influence upon religion. Blenkins comes to the

farm wholly unqualified as a man of Christian morals, but like Tant' Sannie, he makes a continuous show of virtue. While attempting to win over the farm with his Evangelical service, Bonaparte unwittingly drives at its secularization in spite of his failure to display any of the religious intensity he wishes to convey in his performance. His sermon thrives upon the tenets of Evangelicalism: to limit "the intellectual alternatives open to the potential convert by filling his mind with the question of his own Salvation, with the absolute need for personal religious experience, and with ... hell" (McLeod 217). That same perception of salvation leads Waldo away from God and toward repeating crises of faith throughout the novel. Blenkins only serves to alienate Waldo from his legitimate spiritual experiences, and perpetuates an environment on the farm of secular power hierarchy. Ironically, Tant' Sannie, the one who would be most sympathetic to this discourse, cannot understand Blenkins's sermon but enjoys it as a spectacle. In this sense, the reduction of Sunday service to either entertainment or alienation has entirely devalued its sacred dimension. Blenkins sermonizes with the sinister and unreligious motive to catalyze his ascendancy in the secular realm of the farm. The scene has an underlying context in that Schreiner joins in with the *fin de siècle* "decline of hell" that condemned such discourse as sensational and abusive and called for "a broader conception of the sacred, and a more skeptical view of the personal experience of God that was the central concern of Evangelicalism" (McLeod 224).

The central character to become fully submerged in the secular influence of the day is Waldo. Waldo's formative negative experiences stem from the continuity of the workday. In many ways, he reflects attacks upon the Church from the working class, who felt alienated by its ignorance of their painful secular reality. This trend grew throughout the nineteenth century (Chadwick 92), and while Waldo plays the part of the working class, he does not fully

subscribe to that religious discourse, *per se*, because his conception of religion remains detached from the religious experience at play in Victorian cities. Hugh McLeod argues that these “cities appeared yet more godless if set against the backdrop of a past in which ‘all of our ancestors were literal Christian believers, all the time’” (280). This portrait of the active believers of the past could not be more true of Waldo, whose experience in childhood was marked by the constant attendance of faith, whether in rapture or in the crushing want of it. When he goes out to seek meaning in the secular world, Waldo enters into a daily grind that dulls and limits this spiritual capacity; he muses that “you may work a man’s body until his soul dies ... you may work a man until he is a devil” (223). Eventually, Waldo turns to drinking, with the desperate aspiration that perhaps “drunkenness is a kind of temptation to transcendence” (Voss 56). This drunkenness leads him away from any sense of spiritual connection with the world around him until eventually he reaches a point of dark epiphany: “I woke ... it was afternoon ... I saw the earth, so pure after the rain ... and I was a drunken carrier” (224). Waldo continues in his job as a wagoner, but is quickly deterred for good, and the scene that follows shows him identifying with the exhausted ox that “bellowed out aloud,” noting that “[i]f there is a God, it was calling out to its Maker for help” (225) The ox is being killed at the hands of the transport rider who cries, “it is you, Devil, is it, that will not pull?” (225–26). The overextended beast is called a devil, in the same way that endless days of work have rendered Waldo secularized, a self-proclaimed devil, unable to call out to a maker that he does not fully believe in.

Between the two poles of Waldo and Tant’ Sannie, Lyndall emerges as a liminal agent in the novel, bridging eras and modes of thought within her tortured, iconoclastic persona. In a religious reading of the novel, Lyndall interacts with night and day as a Christ

figure, primarily through her death. She stays up with Gregory the night before her passing, recounting to him her dream and its revelation of her greatest fear, “the Gray Dawn” (248), echoing the dark night of the soul that Jesus underwent in the garden of Gethsemane.¹ In the same way, her faith has been tested to the utmost and, in her interaction with the world, she acts as if she were already half departed, predicting her own death. If day signifies the secular world that generates sin in *The Story of an African Farm*, then Lyndall’s sacrifice to it in the carriage, given up to the gray dawning of that world, echoes the vicarious atonement. In order for the world to move away from its sins—its oppression and subjugation in colonial and gender politics—Lyndall dies. As the character who has stood in contrast to societal institutions, embodying solutions and alternatives to their evils, Lyndall’s death symbolizes a sacrifice for redemption. The scene of her death is somewhere indeterminate on the road, the same setting for Waldo’s sufferings as a wagoner in the chaotic secular world. This figuring of Lyndall was anticipated much earlier in the book, when Waldo professes, “I love Jesus Christ, but I hate God” (9). Waldo, tied to this world to the extent that he cannot accept God’s otherness or religion’s schism from life, sees in Lyndall the vision of a better world. In her, the sense of God in nature becomes most fully rendered, and his love plays out along these lines.

By the time Schreiner’s novel reached its audience in Britain, the transcendentalist view of God within nature was not an alien one. As Elizabeth Baigent points out, “histories of British Victorian religion routinely state that Romanticism, to which the experience of nature as transcendental was central, transformed religious thought, language, and practice in the century,” so that nature was often seen as “a visible symbol and sign of the invisible world and offered

¹ See Matthew 26:36; Mark 14:32.

Christians a grace akin to that of the sacraments” (34). Furthermore, as the novel itself demonstrates, a pervasive pagan interest captured Victorian consciousness. Unfortunately for Waldo, and for the other characters as well, the pagan and the Christian worlds never quite converge toward total harmony, nor does either fully satisfy Victorian needs: “In the short term ... paganism abounded in expedients which implied not only activism but also optimism: Christianity by contrast was pessimistic, as it could only advise prayer and resignation” (Obelkevich 308). This argument certainly holds true for Waldo, who uses pantheistic love of nature as a daily inspiration and lasting source of hope, also outlining his alienated relationship with faith.

This dichotomy is best exemplified through the other two significant deaths in the novel, those of Otto and Waldo. Otto dies in bed, amid inchoate plans of how he will navigate his midnight exile from the farm; he packs a hymn book, a Bible, and not much else (60–61). Otto is repeatedly described as childlike, taking his place at the book’s beginning beside the children who freely interact with the religious powers of the night. His sense of charity and trust has not served him in life; with his position on the farm having been usurped by Bonaparte and his good will abused, he still finds reward in a death of “purity and innocence” and the “long, long sleep of eternity” (63). While inflected with pagan undertones, Otto’s death appears essentially as a reward for his irreducible Christian attitude. Otto has lived his life balancing faith against the intimacy that a child brings to holy experience; he has given the children “warm, dark, starlight nights, when they sat together on the doorstep, holding each others’ hands, singing German hymns, their voices rising clear in the still night air—till the German would draw away his hand suddenly to wipe quickly a tear the children must not see” (21). But Otto would always return this awe of the night to his faith,

telling how “the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll, and the stars shall fall as a fig-tree casteth her untimely figs, and there shall be time no longer: ‘When the Son of man shall come in His glory, and all His holy angels with Him’” (21).²

Otto’s death triggers his son, Waldo, to declare that there is “no God, not anywhere!” (69). Eventually, this vacuum is interrupted by Waldo’s realization that God emerges in every fiber of the natural world, but his pagan reading of Christianity propagates the least conclusive death in the book. The final chapter is significantly entitled “Waldo Goes Out to Sit in the Sunshine” and portrays an ordinary day on which the titular character decides to relax on the farm. There, amid the wisdom of the natural world, embodied in the discerning chickens, he dies in a similarly abrupt fashion to his father. Otto’s death has an overt tone of Christian consolation: among the few items he prepares for an unknowable journey, he chooses a hymnbook and a Bible. Waldo’s death nevertheless echoes the image of “the long, long sleep” in that Emily mistakenly remarks, “he will wake soon” (270). Otto’s predominantly Christian, sacred death takes place in the mysterious night, whereas Waldo, whose spirituality has been caught up with this world, dies in the full light of day. He has become so entrenched in the distance with which Evangelical terror has burdened him that “even in his death, Waldo is allied with the material world” (Knechtel 269). In his last moments, he feels spiritually aware of the chickens, “those tiny sparks of brother life ... so real there in that old yard on that sunshiny afternoon,” and once dead, they overtake him: “the chickens had climbed about him and were perching on him” (270).

Schreiner was working against an uncertainty that shaped religion in her era. If she has to offer a picture of Christianity, it must be the “conception of Jesus ... in ‘Times and Seasons’ ... as one who

² See Isaiah 34:4; Matthew 25:31

is not threatening but loving and forgiving, preferring to serve and encourage compassion than to consign people to eternal torment” (Kissack 35). Waldo’s experiences in life exemplify this model as undermined: by religious pretenders like Bonaparte; by the injustice surrounding his pious, innocent father’s death; by the crushing labor he undertakes in his thirst for knowledge of the world; and finally in the death of Lyndall, his firmest link with Christian ideology. Charted in the unusual terms of day and night, the religious conflict at the heart of the novel largely sidesteps the traditionalist didacticism that Schreiner caricatures in Blenkins and Tant’ Sannie. Instead, an unfamiliar stage is set for the quest of faith, one that meets the uncertainty of Schreiner’s era and demands more intrepid searchers. The enormity of tradition is not lost on Schreiner, but she recognizes that despite their religious honesty, the three characters that subscribe to the nurturing, sacred mysteries of night meet premature death. The novel’s other characters never search and never fail—they follow the day’s routine in a secular reality, carrying on *ad infinitum* in a way that mirrors both blind tradition and the endless landscape of the novel’s setting.

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