

NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

Issue 17.2 (Summer 2021)

“Made Alive”: Olive Schreiner’s *Dreams* and the Embodied Vision of Equality

By [Carly Nations](#), Independent Scholar

<1>In her 1914 memoir *Prisons and Prisoners*, suffragette Constance Lytton recalls the reciting of Olive Schreiner’s “Three Dreams in a Desert” (1890) in Holloway Prison by suffrage leader Emmeline Pethick Lawrence and remarks that

...this “Dream” seemed scarcely an allegory. It fell on our ears more like an A B C railway guide to our journey than a figurative parable, though its poetic strength was all the greater for that... We dispersed and went back to our hard beds, to the thought of our homes, to the depressing surroundings of fellow prisoners, to the groans and cries of agonised women—content. (158)

For Lytton, the reciting of Schreiner’s dream was not only a moment that provided solace from her present suffering, but it was *the* moment in which she “determined to begin [her hunger] strike in real earnest” (159). Yet, only 60 years later, renowned feminist critic Elaine Showalter would remark that Schreiner’s *Dreams*, a work of short prose poems, were only “sentimental allegories in the most nauseating *fin-de-siècle* style” (197). Articulating the same distaste for Schreiner’s limited productivity previously expressed by Virginia Woolf, Showalter describes Schreiner as “sadly underambitious,” a writer whose characters, “Like Schreiner,... give up too easily and too soon” (Woolf, “Review of *Letters*” 103, Showalter 203). Yet, in Schreiner’s voice, Showalter hears a familiar echo: “her insistent sometimes nagging narrative voice takes us to the reality of female experience. That voice, soft, heavy, continuous, is a genuine accent of womanhood, one of the chorus of secret voices speaking out of our bones, dreadful and irritating, but instantly recognizable” (198).

<2>In many ways, Schreiner herself may have agreed with these criticisms, as she was constantly plagued by dissatisfaction with her own work. Unable to finish an introduction to Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), struggling to write in the scientific style of her English peers in her socialist political circles, and failing to finish her final novel, Schreiner was a living example of Virginia Woolf’s illustration of Shakespeare’s sister in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). Concerned with suffrage, held under martial law in Hanover in

1902, and working for the political equality of Black South Africans, Schreiner was never able to find ‘a room of her own’ and, instead, “is writing out of double colonialism. The uncelebrated landscapes she was trying to record were both the barren Karoo and the claustrophobic, inner landscape of the new woman” (Showalter 204). Thus, Schreiner’s circumstances should explain the “nagging,” “dreadful,” but “instantly recognizable” quality of her voice—it is not simply the female experience of Schreiner and her contemporaries, but instead the perpetual voice of the female experience, which speaks ceaselessly out of the past, both spurring us forward and reminding us of how little has changed. Yet, Schreiner’s activism was not restricted only to gender. Rather, her perspective on gender depended heavily upon her understanding of race and colonialism. In asserting that “race feeling blinds men’s eyes to all justice,” Schreiner saw the work of feminists in Europe as being inextricably connected to racial violence in her South African homeland and therefore doomed to fail should universal suffrage not be the goal of the movement (“Olive Schreiner to Mary Sauer nee Cloete, 6 February 1896”).⁽¹⁾ Yet, the focus on women’s suffrage in Britain and the United States as largely white movements has meant that the implications of Schreiner’s campaign writing have been largely ignored. In writing *Dreams*, Schreiner would reject the Victorian narrative that labeled some bodies more valuable than others, allowing her to not only reframe her understanding of women, but to create the framework that would enable her to rethink the relationship between race and the body as well. Moreover, her conception of poetry as truth and her rejection of emotionless science appears in *Dreams* as various abstractions embodied. Figures like Love, Sympathy, and Joy are the main characters of *Dreams*. Importantly, Schreiner uses this framework to imagine a better future. Underpinning my reading of Schreiner’s *Dreams* in this article is my broader argument that our own tumultuous political present has been created, at least in part, because of our imaginative failures. Our belief in the capitalistic narrative that winning is better than compromise and that others must suffer so that we can survive prevents us from seeing a future in which a better world is possible. To do so ultimately requires a reframing of our approach to problems of injustice and inequality. It is this need for a revolution that makes *Dreams* an important text worthy of revival.

<3>The vast majority of scholarship around Schreiner has been directed toward her works of longer fiction, particularly her first successful novel, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), and her unfinished novel, *From Man to Man*, and some of her non-fiction writing, specifically her book on the “woman question,” *Woman and Labour* (1911). Allegories, which comprise the aforementioned *Dreams* and which also make appearances throughout her other written work, have drawn criticism. Gerald Monsman, attempting to come to their defense, says that Schreiner’s allegories are only “saved from pseudo-intellectual sentimentality if the critic recognizes that its rhetorical devices and literary tropes satisfied profoundly felt needs seldom met fully in women who were the products of a psychosexual patriarchy” [emphasis mine] (57). Thus, the response to Schreiner’s allegories has long failed to regard them as legitimate literary works in their own right and instead attempted to place them within the bounds of white, male, colonial intellectualism. Critics have failed to understand their importance as works written in response to patriarchal colonialism or as campaign work for women’s suffrage and racial equality. Though some scholars have made more recent attempts to justify Schreiner’s use of allegory – specifically Jade Munslow Ong’s *Olive Schreiner and African Modernism* (2017), which argues that Schreiner’s allegories are specifically anti-colonial in nature – there is still relatively little attention focused on Schreiner’s allegorical collections: *Dreams* (1890), *Dream Life and Real Life* (1893), and *Stories, Dreams and Allegories* (1923). This article focuses on

Schreiner's *Dreams* as a work of allegorical fiction and a campaign document of vital importance both to the women's suffrage movement and work for racial equality.

Emotion and Science

<4>In order to understand Schreiner's belief in the revolutionary nature of allegory, one must also understand her relationship with the "scientific" writing of the London male, socialist elite. Having left South Africa shortly after the conclusion of the First South African War in 1881 to train as a nurse, Schreiner arrived in London and published her first novel, *The Story of an African Farm*. The novel quickly gained widespread attention, catapulting her into a position of influence in England's writing circles despite her relative youth and immigrant status. Concerned with socialist activism and women's suffrage, Schreiner joined Karl Pearson's Men and Women's Club in 1885. The close friendship that developed between her and the eugenicist at times bordered on a romance, but was also marked by conflict between them, garnering criticism from others. Nevertheless Schreiner's work in the Club would lead her to become one of the core members of London's socialist circle alongside Pearson, sexologist Havelock Ellis, writer Edward Carpenter, and feminist Eleanor Marx. While the writing Schreiner completed in London was clearly formative, she often struggled to fulfill male club members' expectations. Both Ellis, another ill-fated love interest but life-long friend, and Pearson encouraged her to eschew emotional writing in favor of more philosophical, psychological, and political responses to the "woman question." According to Liz Stanley, Pearson found in Schreiner someone who was "unexpected, attractive and intriguing, but also difficult to handle and, eventually, to be retreated from" (*Imperialism, Labour and the New Woman* 28). Understanding the purpose of the Men and Women's Club to be one of mutual edification, Schreiner would offer direct criticism to Pearson just as she received it. Having had no such intellectual sparring partners in her youth, Schreiner relished this challenge. Yet Schreiner did not find Pearson a willing partner, and like some other members of the club, instead discovered him to be an unyielding critic.

<5>In 1886, Schreiner left England for a three-year stint in Europe, likely spurred on by growing unrest amongst the members of the Men and Women's Club. In particular, the strange relationship between Pearson and Schreiner created an ongoing tension between the two that is clear throughout their letters even after her departure from London. For instance, while in Europe, Schreiner would pester Pearson with letters begging him to write the introduction to a new edition of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* for her, arguing "it would be in the line of your work, wouldn't it?" ("Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 19 September 1886").⁽²⁾ On the other hand, she also repeatedly expressed disgust for Pearson's preferred style of scientific writing and seemed crippled by the task of engaging in it. Her struggles with the introduction continued through 1888, when Schreiner would finally write to Havelock Ellis,

My Mary Wollstonecraft is going on. It is all poetry from the first to the last, except a few sentences. There are six or seven allegories in it; I've tried to keep them out, but I can't. I have come to the conclusion that only poetry is truth. That other forms are parts of truth, but as soon as a representation has all parts, then it is poetry. As soon as there is the form and the spirit, the passion and the thought, then there is poetry, or the living reality. I don't mean that I attain to true poetry – all I mean is that what makes a man strive after

and seek to see the thing in that way is that it is the reality. It's the other that's fancy and fiction, and this that is real. It's so easy for a mind like mine to produce long logical arguments, or strings of assertions, but when I have done it I feel, such a "valch"⁽³⁾ against it: that is only the material; it has to be combined and made alive. ("Olive Schreiner to Havelock Ellis, 2 November 1888")⁽⁴⁾

<6>In 1889, Pearson's Men and Women's Club disbanded essentially over the same disagreement that Schreiner expresses above: the inability of the men and women members to agree upon "emotional" or "scientific" approaches to the questions of suffrage and colonialism. Pearson viewed the emotional attachment to women's equality and suffrage shown by Schreiner and the other women members of the Men and Women's Club as dangerous to his eugenicist beliefs. In his lectures, Pearson argued that more attention should be paid to child-bearing partnerships, as educated women make better partners, even if only because they are better prepared to educate their children. And as for the sexual reproduction of uneducated men and women: "the state should have a voice in the matter, or else a strong public opinion should intervene[.] Shall those who are diseased, shall those who are nighest to brute, have the power to reproduce their like?...It is difficult to conceive of any greater crime against the race" (Pearson 375). It was this fascination with "race-permanence" that ultimately led Pearson to become outspoken on the emancipation of women – not as an actual supporter of greater freedom for women, but rather as an attempt to maintain fantasies of British racial purity. Over time, Schreiner began to reject Pearson's approach to societal problems. Stanley notes that "Schreiner's allegories were certainly concerned with 'abstract ideas' and 'pure symbols,' but they were also concerned with making an ethical and emotional impact on the reader. She became increasingly engaged by allegory as a form, as she attempted to craft a way of engaging with analytical and political ideas while retaining *emotion* as the mainspring of analysis and politics" [emphasis mine] (28). Shortly after the Men and Women's Club ended, Schreiner decided to leave Europe and return to South Africa in 1889. There, she would complete and publish *Dreams* rather than finish her Introduction as Pearson wished.

<7>The publishing of *Dreams* marked the first step in Schreiner's break from these powerful men, signaling the development of her own voice and ability to address the standing socio-political order that she felt threatened women and Africa. As Stanley asserts, "'Europe' was a transitional time and place for Schreiner, and her return to Africa represented a choice she was making about how to live, and also how to be, as a person" (31). Though Schreiner would make two brief trips to England in 1893 and 1897, she did not return in earnest to Britain until 1913, spending the intervening years working actively against British capitalist investments and subsequent violence in Africa. Once again in Africa, Schreiner wrote various anti-capitalist pamphlets and essays that drew together the relationships between race, gender, and capitalism, identifying the latter as the central dividing factor through "its destruction of pastoralism, and its amoral search for land, minerals, cheap labour and profit" (33). Through this writing, which she called her "Returned South African" project and which was published as a collection posthumously in *Thoughts on South Africa* (1923), Schreiner saw that the cyclical devastation of capitalism could only be stopped if race and gender equality acted as unifying principles. Recognizing her complicity in the "deep-seated prejudices that white people, including her, held about the supposed inferiority of black people," Schreiner became aware that the same prejudices men held toward women applied to the problem of race: "My feelings for the Boer"⁽⁵⁾ changed,

as did, yet later, my feeling towards the native races; but this was not the result of any training, but simply of an increased knowledge” (Stanley 38, *Thoughts* 17). In direct contrast to Pearson, Schreiner would argue that any lack of “civilization” displayed by lower-class white people as well as any person of color was not a direct result of biological composition, but rather of cultural factors which could and should change over time. The shift in Schreiner’s understanding of race paralleled her understanding of gender as a cultural rather than physical attribute. According to Joyce Berkman, Schreiner not only considered the belief in women’s physical delicacy to be a product of European culture, but further “as a symptom of diseased social values and institutions” (92). Schreiner believed that these social values attributed a much larger importance to physical form than was the case in reality, particularly given her experience with Boer and Black women in South Africa whom she saw performing back-breaking agrarian labor alongside housework and childbearing.

<8>Schreiner’s struggle to understand the relationship between cultural assumptions and physical reality, essentially the relationship between the mind and the body, is apparent throughout *Dreams*. As Scott McCracken notes, “Whereas in her novels and non-fictional writings she tended to oscillate between the explanatory power of social Darwinist discourse and her developing anti-racist, anti-colonial politics, allegory allowed [Schreiner] to explore a more flexible materialism than that offered by nineteenth-century science” (232). Indeed, Schreiner’s longer fiction and nonfiction rely upon the eugenicist-inflected language widely in use around her. Even as she moved away from that supposed “science,” she struggled to articulate her understanding of gender and race outside of the constructs created for her by the Empire. This issue has caused scholarly consternation, particularly in respect to *Woman and Labour*.⁽⁶⁾ Yet, in *Dreams*, Schreiner finds not only the freedom to explore issues of gender and race, but also the language to express her thoughts outside the constraints of colonialism.

Dreams

<9>The second in Schreiner’s collection of *Dreams*, “The Hunter,” which appears also in *The Story of an African Farm*, follows the life of a Hunter who initially hunts for “wild-fowl,” but transforms into a hunter for Truth (65). Clothed as a beautiful, white bird, Truth eludes the Hunter who obsesses over her capture. After suffering myriad trials, the Hunter dies without seeing her. Though a feather drops down “on to the breast of the dying man,” he still does not actually see Truth, as “the mist of death” blocks his sight (73). Notably, though the Hunter never sees Truth, his eventual acquisition of at least part of her relies on touch, not vision. Sight, which can be manipulated or tricked, is secondary to the sensation of touch, which affirms the concrete existence of an object. William Cohen in *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* (2008) asserts that

While spiritual and aesthetic discussions of the relation between body and soul or body and mind tend to rely, at least implicitly, on the senses, moving perceptual experience into the foreground provides literary writers the opportunity to consider the materiality of the human more minutely. (13)

Thus, Schreiner’s embodiment of the figure of Truth foregrounds the possibility of a material Truth, which also emphasizes the relationship between any material body and Truth – in order to

be experienced, Truth is to be touched and felt, not seen. In this way, Schreiner draws together the relationship between the very physical, very human experience of suffering, which was for her an ever-present colonial reality, and the nebulous, imprecise search for some (sort of) purpose or meaning. Having not only witnessed the horrors of the South African War, but also the treatment of Black South Africans working under brutal conditions in diamond mines, Schreiner understood that the language of dominance was used to impose suffering. Yet, as Elaine Scarry remarks in *The Body in Pain* (1985), “the only state that is as anomalous as pain is the imagination. While pain is a state remarkable for being wholly without objects, the imagination is remarkable for being the only state that is wholly its objects” (162). Indeed, the feather that lands upon the Hunter exists only as Truth in his imagination. Moreover, even this small success only comes at a great price. When the Hunter meets Wisdom in his search for Truth, he is told that he cannot capture her, because he “has not suffered enough” (66). Yet, Wisdom assures the Hunter that his suffering is not in vain, even if he never succeeds in capturing Truth – “the work is [your] reward” (68). Importantly, Schreiner sees this sort of suffering – toiling and working – as a productive method of seeking truth, especially the truth of human experience which allows for the building of empathy. Schreiner, who was often beset by illness due to complications from severe asthma, continued in her work, writing regularly for her causes and publishing pamphlets rather than finishing her longer, more creative writing. At one point, Schreiner wrote to her friend and fellow South African feminist, Mary Sauer, that she believed her multiple miscarriages were caused by the “mental agony and worry” she felt over her family’s opposition to her political work, particularly the displeasure from her mother who was a staunch supporter of British intervention in South Africa and who had long been an antagonistic figure in Schreiner’s life (“Olive Schreiner to Mary Sauer nee Cloete, September 1896”).⁽⁷⁾ Within this letter lies the tension of Schreiner’s South African life as well as the embodiment of the Hunter. Though seeking after Truth inevitably involves some great deal of personal sacrifice, Schreiner saw in voluntary suffering the opportunity to achieve equality. Her own personal pain allowed her to see the ways in which one’s own suffering and sacrifice reveal the suffering of another. It was this ability that motivated both Schreiner’s allegorical writing and her non-fiction work. Particularly, if she could help men to see the suffering of women, perhaps they would be then willing to share the woman’s burdens and eventually move a step further to see the suffering of Black men and women as well.

<10>Schreiner’s most famous dream, “Three Dreams in a Desert,” opens with a scene of shared bondage. Two beasts of burden lay in the sand, one of which is revealed to be woman who bears “the burden of subjection” and is bound by the “broad band of Inevitable Necessity” (80). The second beast is revealed to be man, who is inextricably linked to her by the same bands he used to tie her down. Though the “burden of subjection” eventually breaks, the link band that ties the two beasts together does not. As woman attempts to rise, man moves away from her, tightening the band and making her struggle more difficult. Yet, a “figure” in the desert tells the dreamer, “When she moves she draws the band that binds them, and hurts him, and he moves farther from her. The day will come when he will understand and will know what she is doing. Let her once stagger on to her knees. In that day he will stand close to her, and look into her eyes with sympathy” (81 – 82). Though the dream sequence ends hopefully with woman indeed staggering to her knees, Schreiner does not imagine practically, at this point at least, the role that man plays in woman’s ability to gain equality. Instead, Schreiner emphasizes the shared nature of their suffering as well as the woman’s responsibility to overcome bondage. As McCracken argues, the

African landscape acts as a new stage for this argument of shared suffering and hope of eventual equality:

The figures might be seen to represent the systems of knowledge produced by Victorian culture with which any emergent subjectivity must grapple. In the case of Schreiner this engagement was from a marginal position in the Empire, deprived of the educational opportunities available to the male intellectuals with whom she debated. ...On the one hand, the constraints placed on the woman in the desert embody the narrator's lack of educational capital. On the other, the staging of that exclusion provides the opportunity for a dialogue that makes the question one of social rather than natural laws. (236)

Because Schreiner approaches the issue of gender equality from a colonized perspective, she is able to both see and reveal the ways in which "natural law," or more specifically European acceptance of eugenics, is actually reflective of culture, not of any greater moral truth. Yet, in order for these social laws to be revealed, one must be willing to share in the suffering of another. After all, Schreiner argues that each is inextricably connected to the other; thus, men can either choose to avoid "sympathy," struggling to break free yet nevertheless bound, or can embrace it, suffering alongside woman and allowing her to rise. Furthermore, Schreiner's use of the African landscape brings into question the extent to which she intended for the female beast of burden to be an African woman in particular. Carolyn Burdett argues that "the atrocious resignation" of woman at the beginning of "Three Dreams"

...seems to belong to Schreiner as much as to the African woman. The African experience is supposed to provide evidence of the distinctive evolutionary conditions facing late nineteenth-century, middle-class western women, and hence the social rightness of feminist demands in the present. Instead there is a moment of sameness and identification which the narrative is unable to leave behind. (58)

Thus, Schreiner recognizes the cognitive dissonance of the early feminist movement, which demanded equality, but only equality for a few. This exclusionary approach to inclusivity was (and still is) doomed to fail. The inherent contradictions in the approach to equality revealed not only a moral bankruptcy within the movement, but also the ability for cracks and fissures to form along the lines that unified the women working toward suffrage. If the morality of equality was itself fungible, on what ground then did women's suffrage stand? This question became for Schreiner of paramount importance, particularly in the formation of the Women's Enfranchisement League in South Africa, and, in her writing, she looked to the unifying experience of suffering as a way to heal the division.

<11>The second of the three dreamscapes in "Three Dreams" highlights this commitment to generative suffering. Much like the Hunter who sacrifices his body to find Truth, the second dream figure in "Three Dreams" also sacrifices her body to create a path to the future. Notably, the figure is female and must give up not only herself, but her boy child as well, even removing him from her breast as he feeds (83). Just as suffering is a constant companion to Schreiner, the struggle between productivity and motherhood also permeates her work. Schreiner desperately wanted a child of her own and believed motherhood should not prevent the independence of the mother, because it also necessitated the involvement of the father. She vehemently argued that

“[e]very attempt to sever the pro-creator and that which he creates is a distinct step of retrogression towards that savage condition in which the woman was suppose [*sic*] to be more nearly related to the child because her relation was more grossly palpable” (“Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 5 February 1888”).⁽⁸⁾ She believed child-rearing was the responsibility of both parents and that failure by “civilized” Europeans to share in the duties of parenthood was equally “savage” as the behavior displayed by the colonized peoples to whom those Europeans considered themselves superior. Additionally, Schreiner envisioned women’s mental labor as an equally creative enterprise to physical labor, likening her own writing to “the agony of giving birth” (“Olive Schreiner to Ernest Rhys, February 1888”).⁽⁹⁾ Yet Schreiner was only able to carry one pregnancy to term and then gave birth to a baby girl who died one day later. In this way, “Three Dreams in a Desert” would become a sort of prophecy for Schreiner’s life. Having lost her only child, the women of the suffrage movement became the generation that Schreiner’s work nourished. In the second dreamscape, the woman makes a similar choice:

“I hear a sound of feet, a thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands, and they beat this way!”

He said, “They are the feet of those that shall follow you. Lead on! make a track to the water’s edge! Where you stand now, the ground will be beaten flat by ten thousand times ten thousand feet.” And he said, “Have you seen the locusts how they cross a stream? First one comes down to the water-edge, and it is swept away, and then another comes and then another, and then another, and at last with their bodies piled up a bridge is built and the rest pass over.”

She said, “And, of those that come first, some are swept away, and are heard of no more; their bodies do not even build the bridge?”

“And are swept away, and are heard of no more—and what of that?” he said.

“And what of that—” she said. (84 – 85)

The woman then “turn[s] down that dark path to the river” and “make[s] a track to the water’s edge” (85). Here, Schreiner connects the sacrifice of the woman’s body “at the water’s edge” with the birth of the bridge, over which will cross “the entire human race.” As the Hunter sacrifices himself for Truth, the woman sacrifices herself for the entirety of humanity, for some unforeseeable future worthy of her life. Importantly, the third and final dreamscape of “Three Dreams” sees the sacrifice of Schreiner’s second dreamer brought to fruition: “on the hills walked brave women and brave men, hand in hand. And they looked into each other’s eyes, and they were not afraid.” A voice confirms to the dreamer that this is indeed “IN THE FUTURE.”

<12>Monsman attributes to Schreiner’s allegorical form her ability to “envision the ideal point at which isolating differences are overcome, that historical moment in which the self transcends its loneliness and identifies the Other as no longer foreign but as that in which its dreams are reflected” (56). The spaces among the first, second, and third dreamscapes in “Three Dreams in a Desert” exemplify this “ideal point.” Drawing together the past, the present, and the future, Schreiner’s use of allegory blurs the lines among the three, but also gives body to both the

sacrifices and achievements of women in each realm. The beasts of the first landscape embody the sacrifices of women past and represent Schreiner's own understanding of sacrifice. The hopeful woman on the shore and the dying Hunter both become the beast with "light in her eyes," "stagger[ing] on to its knees" (82). The second dreamer through bodily sacrifice, moving down to the river's edge, creates the possibility for the third and final dreamscape to exist. Thus, in these moments of metaphorical death, Schreiner's dreamers also give birth.

<13>The following dream, "A Dream of Wild Bees," is unlike the previous dreams in that the body of the woman is no longer symbolic in its relationship to the rest of the world: it is not a beast, nor is it walking down to the shore. Simply, "A Dream of Wild Bees" follows a pregnant woman who, like every woman, wishes the best for her child. Notably, the woman is more than pregnant; the child is her ninth and her other children play noisily in the background of the dream. Though many of life's privileges approach the pregnant mother and offer themselves to her child, the mother eschews them all – from Love to Talent to Wealth – eventually choosing "the Ideal" (89). Importantly, she does so knowing that her child will suffer. She asks if her child will find Love and is told:

He shall hunger for it – but he shall not find it. When he stretches out his arms to it, and would lay his heart against a thing he loves, then far off along the horizon he shall see a light play. He must go towards it. The thing he loves will not journey with him; he must travel alone. When he presses somewhat to his burning heart, crying "Mine, mine, my own!" he shall hear a voice – "Renounce! renounce! this is not thine!" (88)

Yet, the gift of the Ideal allows the child to dream, an ability that is instantly imparted in his mother's womb – "the child trembled" at the bee's touch and immediately "had a dream" (89). The dream is marked by a "sensation of light! Light – that it had never seen. Light – that perhaps it never should see. Light – that existed somewhere!" Here, Schreiner once again draws the reader to the rewards of the sacrificial experience of suffering. Vision, which is perceptible in the baby's dream despite his "unseeing eyes," connects the divide between reality and the Ideal as well as the past with the future. According to Elizabeth Grosz, "The body must be regarded as a site of social, political, cultural, and geographical inscriptions, production, or constitution. The body is not opposed to culture, a resistant throwback to a natural past; it is itself a cultural, *the* cultural, product" (23). In "A Dream of Wild Bees," the body of the unborn child is this cultural product. Symbolizing both the past and the future, the child is the embodiment of a single, past action, sex that leads to conception, while also becoming and growing into a physical representation of the future. The hopes and dreams of the world, the ability to right past wrongs and remake humanity, rest within the work of the future and are thus the work of children. Schreiner saw that within the reality of capitalist colonialism was the also inherent sacrifice of lower-class bodies and Black bodies for the protection of upper-class bodies and white comfort. "A Dream of Wild Bees," which she wrote for Karl Pearson, should therefore be read both as a rebuke of Pearson's eugenicist essays and a rejection of the Victorian approach to the body, which insisted on the inherent inferiority of women and of bodies of color. Schreiner argues that the work of the future cannot simply be science. The work must also be children and childbirth – relinquishing control of the body, even in pain, for the work of creation and the work of vision. Such nebulous work can be defined only as something like "the Ideal" or "Light – that existed somewhere!" But even as the Ideal defies explanation, it is not incomprehensible. Messy and

painful, long and all-consuming, the Ideal is childbirth and the child, the sacrifice of love for the purpose of creation.

A Modern Feminism

<14>What would become a modern understanding of feminism – that women can be mothers and workers, equal in the home and in intellectual and physical ability – was also Schreiner’s particular approach to gender equality, one that separated her from other prominent, contemporary feminists. I maintain that, in suffering, Schreiner found a uniting experience. Pain, which could be experienced by anyone, she connected to creation. If pain could be experienced by anyone, so then could the process of creation. Yet the importance of suffering for Schreiner was not simply that it was connected directly to creation, but that creation through suffering necessitated empathy. Thus, suffering through one’s own difficulties was not enough; rather one must seek and desire to suffer with another. The final two dreams in the text are the crux of Schreiner’s forward-thinking consideration of shared suffering and gender. They emphasize Schreiner’s argument that women are as capable as men, both in the realm of the intellectual and the physical, alongside her belief in the necessity of male participation in the usually feminine realms of emotion and creation. Though seemingly far less controversial than her anti-colonialist political arguments, Schreiner’s idea of shared emotional labor was countercultural to the Victorian understanding of gender, even amongst feminist writers and thinkers. Arthur Symons, who was an ardent supporter of Schreiner’s work, recommended *Story of an African Farm* to Walter Pater who refused to read it, “fearing that Schreiner’s subjects would affect him too strongly” and therefore would supposedly feminize him (Monsman 51). While Schreiner looked to England to provide her with an opportunity to explore and grow as a writer, she found, even amongst her supporters, a staunch adherence to the damaging ideas that prevented her continued success. Monsman argues that “the allegorical pattern of figurative to literal itself furnished a transforming paradigm for relationships of dominance and subservience” for Schreiner, allowing her to question both societal norms surrounding gender and the structure of gender itself (55). Yet, the importance of allegory was not simply that it compromised the stability of social structures, but that it simultaneously concretized the moral and political ideas that so absorbed her. Unsatisfied with the overly scientific pictures of the relationship between men and women being posited by other outspoken voices at the time, Schreiner built her own reality, not out of science, but out of vision. Moreover, as McCracken argues, Schreiner’s observations around gender extended also to race: “All New Women writers were working within the constraints already laid down by social Darwinism where the discourse of gender was enmeshed in the discourse of Empire, but Schreiner’s allegories are unique in the way they take the available categories of ‘race’ and gender and show them to be performative rather than essential terms” (232). Schreiner’s claim that she wrote “in blood” further emphasizes the relationship between her emotional feeling, the lifeblood which motivated her work, and the work itself, which she saw as her physical blood on paper (McClintock 259). That the figures throughout *Dreams* must also make similar sacrifices suggests that Schreiner recognized emotional attachment as fundamental to the physical effort needed to produce culture change that could resolve the intertwining questions of “woman” and “race.”

<15>The final dream, and the longest in the text, “The Sunlight Lay Across My Bed,” is Schreiner’s most specific exploration of gender fluidity. Her approach to race in this final dream

is not quite so direct as her treatment of gender; yet both rely upon her rejection of the body as the origin of worth and value. Organized as a Dante-esque experience of the afterlife, “The Sunlight Lay Across My Bed” also mirrors “Three Dreams in a Desert” as the dreamer drifts in and out of consciousness throughout the dream, the sounds of the city mingling with the sounds of the dreamscape. In the dream, the speaker travels through different levels of Hell where one of her first experiences is the sight of various women repeatedly poisoning fruit on a tree so that no one else may eat (103). The women are closely followed by men “making pitfalls into which their fellows may sink” simply “because each thinks that when his brother falls he will rise” (104). Though Schreiner never explicitly states the location of Hell, this exchange between the speaker and God suggests that the Hell she experiences in her dream is simply the reality of Earth. Later, the people of Hell call for “More wine!” which is made from the blood of their fellow humans who are trampled underneath the feet of one another as they scramble to escape a “wine-press” and join the party of revelers (196). The blood that constitutes the wine is not simply an embodiment of sacrifice, but is the body itself, sacrificed for the enjoyment of others. But unlike Schreiner’s generative suffering which leads to empathy, the blood produced by the press is not given freely, but is rather forced from the victims as they attempt to crawl out on top of one another. According to Grosz, bodily fluids

...attest to a certain irreducible “dirt” or disgust, a horror of the unknown or the unspecifiable that permeates, lurks, lingers, and at times leaks out of the body, a testimony of the fraudulence of impossibility of the “clean” and “proper.” ...Body fluids flow, they seep, they infiltrate; their control is a matter of vigilance, never guaranteed. In this sense, they betray a certain irreducible materiality. (194)

Thus, by identifying the blood as “wine,” the revelers in Hell not only betray those whose bodies have been sacrificed, but they also deny their own humanity. They consume the blood as wine, because recognizing the fluid as blood would be to recognize the humanity of those who produce it. As McCracken argues, “This drama underlines the integral relationship between the Victorian middle-class family and concepts of ‘race,’ where a racial other is needed to sustain a pristine sense of civilised society” (238). Moreover, this comparison should, of course, hearken to the consumption of blood in the form of wine in the Eucharist. Also symbolizing the liminal space between blood willingly given and blood forcibly taken, the Eucharist both re-enacts Jesus’s celebration of the Last Supper and the sacrifice of his body and blood in the crucifixion. Jesus’s identity as a murdered man of color (recognized by Schreiner as such in her longer allegorical work, *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897)) is also integral here, as we must see the bodies of those in the wine press as marginalized bodies – both female and colonized. In Schreiner’s Hell, women suffer for the sake of men and, more specifically, Black men and women suffer for the sake of white indulgence and white willful ignorance. For Schreiner, sight does not necessarily correlate with vision. Though the revelers can certainly see the source of the wine, they choose to not see it and maintain their place at the table.

<16>Moving from the Hell dreamscape to the Heaven dreamscape, Schreiner associates the levels of Heaven, which at first appear dim, to an increase in light, allowing the dreamer to explore the relationship of sex and gender to gradual enlightenment. In the first Heaven,

I saw that some were working in companies, and some alone, but most were in twos, sometimes two men and sometimes two women; but generally there was one man and one woman...God said, "When one man and one woman shine together, it makes the most perfect light. Many plants need that for their growing. Nevertheless, there are more kinds of plants in Heaven than one, and they need many kinds of light." (114)

Here, Schreiner's exploration of the different sexes in Hell creating failure for themselves meets its opposite. As men and women work together, heterosexual gender roles fall away to allow for the creation of "many kinds of light." Moreover, Schreiner emphasizes the transcendent nature of the body itself, as the dreamer notices heavenly beings carrying a disabled man – "This is our brother who once fell and lost his hands and feet, and since then he cannot help himself; but we have touched the maimed stumps so often that now they shine brighter than anything in Heaven" (115). Though the man cannot leave his damaged body, the body itself is worthy. God questions the dreamer's concerns about the damaged body by asking, "Didst thou then think that love had need of eyes and hands!" Thus, the body itself transcends the normal definition of "body," even as it still retains its corporeal qualities.

<17>In her study of abled and disabled bodies, *The Right to Maim* (2017), Jasbir Puar uses Michel Foucault's definition of the body as "ability-machine" and connects it to the growth of for-profit capitalism, arguing that "all bodies are being evaluated in relation to their success or failure in terms of health, wealth, progressive productivity, upward mobility, enhanced capacity" (15). For Puar, that ability also includes capacity – the ability to overcome societal constraints as well as physical ones – ultimately meaning that "there is no such thing as an 'adequately abled' body" (15). In light of Schreiner's portrayal of Heaven, the light which shines out of the "maimed stumps" of the man who is celebrated – "No one is allowed to keep him long, he belongs to all" – emphasizes Schreiner's rejection of the body as "ability-machine" and her criticism of the societal structures that prevent both men and women from accessing positions of equality (115). Schreiner's outspoken activism for women's suffrage alongside universal suffrage for Black South Africans combined with her vehement anti-war work meant that she was often pushing against the dominant powers at home and abroad, as well as against many of the progressive groups that would have supported one of her interests, but certainly not all. Schreiner's own chronically ill body meant that even at her most productive, she was herself fighting against the expectations of productivity placed on her mostly by friends outside the colony. Her desire to find in her body not simply a broken and unwilling partner, but a constructive and valuable contributor finds its way into her conception of Heaven. Notably, Heaven is not a place where there is rest, but rather a place where work is joyous, painless, and fruitful. Just like the Hell which exists on earth, Schreiner's Heaven too is earthly.

<18>As the dreamer ascends into the highest Heaven, she sees a "figure bend over its work, and labour mightily," much like the beings who also work in the lower Heavens. However, unlike the pairs of men and women in the lower Heavens, those in the highest Heaven are indeterminate in gender. God explains, "In the least Heaven sex reigns supreme; in the higher it is not noticed; but in the highest it does not exist" (118). Importantly, the being reaches to the highest Heaven "By a bloody stair," just as the Hunter carved a staircase to Truth, leaving behind his own blood. Though the dreamer does not understand the highest being's work, God explains that the figure is toiling over the creation of music – "And he touched my ears, and I heard it...Then it grew so

bright I could not see things separately; and which were God, or the man, or I, I could not tell; we were all blended. I cried to God, ‘Where are you?’ but there was no answer, only music and light” (118 – 9). In the highest Heaven, the body is not just capable of work, but derives its identity and meaning from that work. Interestingly, though, the work is to create music. Unlike the lower Heavens where the beings contribute to the growth of plants or to the creation of a crown, in the highest Heaven, the being creates art. Poetry, which Schreiner says “alone is absolute truth,” represents a unification of the body and mind in that both must work together in order to create (“Olive Schreiner to Havelock Ellis, 24 January 1888”).⁽¹⁰⁾ Though Schreiner long attempted her more philosophical, scientific introduction to Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication*, she instead produced *Dreams*, alongside a series of other stories and allegories. But rather than regretting their creation, Schreiner comes to regard her poetry as being the greater work (“Olive Schreiner to Havelock Ellis, 11 August 1890”).⁽¹¹⁾ Cohen argues that for Victorian writers “Embodiment supplies a way of suspending subjectivity, of forestalling the fantasy of completeness that inheres in the concept of the human, without necessitating transcendence of the material” (135). Yet Schreiner rejects Cohen’s notion of embodiment. For Schreiner, the body is not the method of suspending subjectivity, but the source of subjectivity. Gender, ability, and race, though bodily aspects, were cultural realities. Heaven is created when all bodies are capable of working together, sharing in the act of creation, and free from the constraints of societal assumptions.

The Dream of Equality

<19>To Schreiner, the content of the soul, embodied in dreams and visions, revealed the reality of Truth. It is this Truth that spoke to suffragettes enduring hunger strikes in prisons. Holloway Prison, which was one of the main sites of imprisonment for suffragettes as well as the center of controversial forced feedings, became the heart of circulation for Schreiner’s *Dreams*. Lytton’s *Prisons and Prisoners* makes clear that *Dreams* was not simply a text prized by some suffragettes, but rather *the* text of suffrage. “Three Dreams in a Desert” was not only esteemed by Emmeline Pethick Lawrence, but memorized and recited to the other imprisoned women (Lytton 156). After this reading, Lytton would remark, “Olive Schreiner, more than any other author, has rightly interpreted the woman’s movement and symbolized and immortalized it by her writings” (157). Yet Schreiner’s relationship with suffrage work was a difficult one. The word “equality,” like many of Schreiner’s figures in *Dreams*, defied definition. To a certain extent, even if we were to define “equality” as enfranchisement, suffragettes found various boundaries to the vote that led to disagreements about who exactly deserved representation and how that representation should be achieved. Schreiner’s call for universal suffrage in South Africa would lead her to separate from the Women’s Enfranchisement League, a suffrage organization that she helped create, as the other leaders refused to extend membership to Black women. Alongside the race divisions that problematized the movement in Africa, class divisions created additional problems, as the vast majority of suffrage supporters in Europe were also members of the middle class. Carolyn Burdett notes that Schreiner is ever contemptuous of the growth of capitalism both in Europe and the colonies, arguing in various pamphlets that one of the dangers of racism is its ability to undermine “working-class action” (158). Schreiner’s outspokenness on this issue would not only elicit attention from her colonialist friend, Pearson, but his direct fury. In a letter, which was intercepted by Schreiner’s husband Samuel Cronwright, Pearson decries Schreiner’s assertions:

You use the great power of your words you have to incite all the racial passion you can, and you do it by working yourself into a state in which you lose sight of one half of the truth... You speak as if a moiety of the South Africans in South Africa today had sole right to that land now and for ever. But my children and the children of all the crowded lands of Europe have a right in all new lands and the conditions must be such or be made such that they can live in them. (First and Scott 242)

Of course, Schreiner's writing about the future of South Africa's devolution into chaos under capitalism anticipates the inevitable future – just under thirty years after her death, Schreiner's homeland would be plunged into fifty years of Apartheid.

Conclusion

<20>In 1991, Anita Hill took to the U.S. national stage to not only accuse Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment, but to assert her dignity and self-worth. In 2018 Christine Blasey-Ford followed Hill's lead when she testified at a hearing upon the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the U.S. Supreme Court. Yet in spite of feminism's achievements, and the fact that both women are educated, powerful and wealthy – and one of them with the privilege attendant to a white woman – the response to this testimony was not only disbelief but an insistence that their self-belief was a threat to the very order of society. Now, the appointment and confirmation of Justice Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court articulates the threat of feminism's decline. Having built her career on undermining the legal protections that afforded women and people of color equal rights and privileges, Justice Barrett defended her patriarchal position as one which upheld “the rule of law” while Republicans praised her status as a working mother of seven as representative of some sort of “true” womanhood (Higgins). That her past policies and actions were not only exclusionary, but actively damaging to other women was, to her supporters, of no consequence. Notably, the voices of Black and Brown feminists have long warned white women of this future. In *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women that a Movement Forgot* (2020), Mikki Kendall argues that white feminists, traditionally represented by suffragettes, 1970s Second Wave feminists, and, to some extent, Third Wave feminists as well as self-defined “post-feminists,” have failed in their bid for equality by using the work of feminism to gain the position of oppressor:

Irrationally, what white women seem to fear is that if they push back against misogyny, then what power they currently have will be lost. In the same way that many white men seem to see power as a zero-sum game, so white women want to cling to the agency and selfhood they feel they have fought so hard to achieve. They genuinely believe that by defending these avatars of the patriarchy, they will somehow benefit even if it is at the expense of everyone else. (170)

Instead, what white feminists have found is that their message of exclusionary privilege differs little from the more conservative perspective of anti-feminists, leading to the growth of conservative power, even as record numbers of women poured into Washington D.C. for the Women's March in 2017. The sacrifice particularly of Black voices in American feminism mirrors the choices made by early feminists working in the suffrage movement around the world. As bell hooks argued, the failure of the “college-educated white middle and upper-class women”

who organized the Second-Wave feminist movement to “[undo] the sexist and racist brainwashing that had taught them to regard women unlike themselves as Others” directly resulted in the failure of the feminist movement to “have a transformative effect on American culture” (121). Schreiner, neither an insider nor an outsider to British politics, found herself engaged in this same argument in South Africa, warning of the total failure of feminism should Black women not be enfranchised alongside white women.

<21>To resurrect Schreiner at this moment is an act of resistance, not simply an act of scholarship. Her ardent pacifism united with her belief in the power of enfranchisement led her to work tirelessly for universal suffrage in South Africa, demanding equal rights for men and women, Black and white alike. Unlike other women working in South Africa, Schreiner’s voice in particular was sought by those in positions of power. Cecil Rhodes and Schreiner began a close friendship that ended dramatically after Rhodes announced support for the Strop Bill which would legalize the battery of Black laborers.⁽¹²⁾ Yet, as Schreiner continued her political work, her “little allegories” reveal the evolution of her thinking on the relationship between gender and race that ultimately led her to reject the scientific methodizing of eugenicist theory and politics. Thus, Schreiner’s allegorical voice is a prophetic one. It provides solace in the present moment of difficulty as well as the promise of eventual progress, the resolving of injustices and the redemption of suffering. However, this redemption can be achieved only if the vision inspires devotion, action which is both influential and repeated. Therefore, at its core, the allegory as prophecy must inspire a dedication to supporting the liberation of those who are oppressed. In this way, Schreiner’s own activism and her concern with rectifying the world’s injustices are the unifying prophecy and action of *Dreams*.

Notes

(1)Stanley, Olive Schreiner Letters Project. NLSA Cape Town, Special Collections, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.” Lines 33 – 34.^(△)

(2)Stanley, Olive Schreiner Letters Project. “Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 19 September 1886, University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.” Line 14.^(△)

(3)A word particular to Schreiner, “valch” here acts almost as an onomatopoeia, expressing her visceral disgust for scientific writing.^(△)

(4)Stanley, *Olive Schreiner Letters Project*. NLSA Cape Town, Special Collections. This set of Cronwright-Schreiner extracts are of letters which appear in *The Letters of Olive Schreiner*, and regarding which there are typescripts made by him in the NLSA collections. They are included here for the sake of completeness. However, when surviving original letters can be compared, these show that Cronwright-Schreiner often changed or even bowdlerized the originals in producing his versions. Considerable caution should therefore be used in referring to their content. Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription. Lines 10 – 23. All further references to this set of letters will be marked with an asterisk (*) that points back to this disclaimer.^(△)

(5) Now considered a pejorative term due to its usage during Apartheid, “Boer” refers to the descendants of Dutch settlers in South Africa. I have chosen to maintain the use of the word here to avoid confusion with Schreiner’s references. (△)

(6) Carolyn Burdett addresses this phenomenon specifically in her book *Olive Schreiner and the Progress of Feminism* (2001). (△)

(7) Stanley, *Olive Schreiner Letters Project*. NLSA Cape Town, Special Collections, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription. Line 11. (△)

(8) Stanley, Olive Schreiner Letters Project. University College London Library, Special Collections, UCL, London, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription. Lines 16 – 19. (△)

(9) Stanley, *Olive Schreiner Letters Project*. British Library Manuscripts, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription. Line 41. (△)

(10) Stanley, Olive Schreiner Letters Project. Harry Ransom Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription. Lines 13 – 14. (△)

(11) Stanley, *Olive Schreiner Letters Project*. NLSA Cape Town, Special Collections. Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription. Lines 7 – 10.* (△)

(12) Officially entitled the Masters and Servants Act (1890), the bill never became law. (△)

Works Cited

Berkman, Joyce Avrech. *The Healing Imagination of Olive Schreiner: Beyond South African Colonialism*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1989.

Black, Barbara, et al. “Introduction.” Broadview Press, 2020, pp. 13 – 48.

Burdett, Carolyn. *Olive Schreiner and the Progress of Feminism: Evolution, Gender, Empire*. Palgrave, 2001.

Cohen, William A. *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses*. University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Indiana University Press, 1994.

Higgins, Tucker. “Here Are the Top Moments and Highlights from Day 2 of Amy Coney Barrett’s Confirmation Hearings.” *CNBC*, 13 October 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/13/amy-coney-barrett-confirmation-hearings-top-moments-from-day-2.html>. Accessed 13 October 2020.

hooks, bell. *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Pluto Press, 1982.

Horton, Susan R. *Difficult Women, Artful Lives: Olive Schreiner and Isak Dinesen, In and Out of Africa*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

Kendall, Mikki. *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women That a Movement Forgot*. Viking, 2020.

Lytton, Constance. *Prisons and Prisoners: Some Personal Experiences*. Heinemann, 1914.

McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. Routledge, 1995.

McCracken, Scott. "Stages of Sand and Blood: the Performance of Gendered Subjectivity in Olive Schreiner's Colonial Allegories." *Women's Writing*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1996, pp. 231 – 242.

Monsman, Gerald. "Olive Schreiner's Allegorical Vision." *Victorian Review*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2015, pp. 49 – 62.

Ong, Jade Munslow. *Olive Schreiner and African Modernism: Allegory, Empire and Postcolonial Writing*. Routledge, 2018.

Pearson, Karl. "The Woman's Question." *The Ethic of Free Thought and Other Addresses and Essays*, 2nd ed. The Macmillan Company, 1901, pp. 354 – 378.

Puar, Jasbir K. *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*. Duke University Press, 2017.

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton University Press, 1977.

Schreiner, Olive. *Dreams*, edited by Barbara Black, Carly Newton Nations, and Anna Spydell. Broadview, 2020.

Schreiner, Olive. *Thoughts on South Africa*. T. Fisher Unwin, 1923.

Stanley, Liz. *Imperialism, Labour and the New Woman: Olive Schreiner's Social Theory*. Routledge, 2013.

Stanley, Liz. *The Olive Schreiner Letters Project*. University of Edinburgh, Leeds Beckett University, University of Sheffield. <https://www.oliveschreiner.org/>. Accessed 30 May 2021.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Hogarth Press, 1959.

Woolf, Virginia. "Review of *The Letters of Olive Schreiner*," *New Public*, 18 March 1925. Reproduced in *Women and Writing*, edited by Michele Barrett. The Women's Press, 1979.

