Breaking Down Binaries: Gender Subversion in Olive Schreiner's *Undine* and *The Story of an African Farm*

by

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates a thus far neglected aspect of Olive Schreiner's feminism, namely her subversion of Victorian gender models in her early novels, *Undine* and *The Story of an African Farm*. In order to determine what is being subverted a brief outline is first provided of the nature of traditional male and female Victorian gender characteristics; thereafter, the key arguments of Gender Theory are provided, the cornerstone of which is that gender is a social construct and not determined by biology.

Analysis of *Undine* focusses on Schreiner's eponymous heroine's subversion of female gender roles, finding that Undine's subversion is incomplete, due to her repeated lapses into conventional behaviour, seen mainly in her need to fulfil a role of service. In addition, details in *Undine* are linked to biographical aspects of Schreiner's own life as many critics have made a link between Schreiner's fiction and instances in her life.

In *The Story of an African Farm* attention is given to both female and male gender subversion. Female gender subversion is analysed in the character Lyndall who deviates from accepted female characteristics of women as meek and docile, while discussion also focusses on her more conventional cousin, Em, who by acting as her foil, highlights Lyndall's subversiveness. Although in comparison to Undine, Lyndall shows great progress in her ability to free herself from traditional roles for women, she remains held back by her inability to break free from the idea that service to something was an inherent part of women's natures. Finally, Schreiner's most radical work regarding gender is found in connection with her male characters, Gregory Rose and Waldo. While Schreiner shows the constructed nature of male gender models in her characterisation of Gregory who identifies more with the female gender, Waldo avoids gender categories completely, aligning himself with neither femininity nor masculinity, by finding an "escape" from these artificial social constructs in the natural world.

Key words:

Olive Schreiner, *Undine*, *The Story of an African Farm*, Gender Theory, gender subversion and South African fiction

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Introduction

Gender Models: Production and Subversion

Olive Schreiner was one of the most formidable figures of her time. During her life, she was involved in various contentious causes: she was one of the first campaigners for women's rights, she was against British imperialism in South Africa and opposed the Anglo-Boer War, and she spoke out against racism in South Africa. This dissertation's general area of interest will be Olive Schreiner's feminism, which is reflected not only in her life by, among other things, her involvement in the Women's Enfranchisement League in Cape Town, but also in her writing, most importantly her non-fiction work *Women and Labour* (1911). Schreiner's importance as one of the leading nineteenth-century feminists is testified to by the description of *Women and Labour* as "the 'bible' of the British Women's suffrage movement" (Barash 1989, 269). The feminist value of *Woman and Labour* lies in Schreiner's exploration of women's relationship to labour. In this long essay, she makes the bold argument that changes in material production had resulted in changes in the situation of women. She asserts that women's relegation to an increasingly passive role in the domestic sphere made parasites of them, as their original domestic labours had been replaced by technology.

Furthermore, Schreiner also expressed her feminist ideas in her fiction, both through her short stories and her novels. Her fictional characters, such as Lyndall (in *The Story of an African Farm*) and Rebekah (in *From Man to Man*), draw a picture of the limited lives of Victorian women, marked by duty and sacrifice. More specifically, some of the feminist issues that Schreiner explores in her fiction include education for women, marriage, the relationships between men and women, and the sexual double

standards that were applied to men and women. The variety of feminist scholarship on Schreiner is also a testament to her importance in the field. This includes Laurence Lerner's essay "Olive Schreiner and the Feminists" (1983), Laura Chrisman's article "Colonialism and Feminism in Olive Schreiner's 1890s Fiction" (1993) and Caroline Burdett's book *Olive Schreiner and the Progress of Feminism* (2001).

Although Schreiner's feminism can be considered as ahead of its time, it had its limitations, most especially in her conception of new roles for women who she seems unable to have imagined finding fulfilment outside of the traditional forms of service. Schreiner's feminist ideas are stunted, to a degree, by her heroines' inability to escape the burden of service. Carol Barash remarks on this topic that "[i]n all of Schreiner's heroines there are gaps between their best vision of a new society and their entrapment in a Victorian world of separate men's and women's spheres which marks biology as destiny" (1989, 274). Thus, it can be said that Schreiner's heroines are torn between their urge to rebel against the rigid constraints that society imposes on them and their more deeply rooted instincts to conform.

Despite the fact that Schreiner's feminism might have had its shortcomings, one way in which she can be considered radically ahead of her time is in her subversion of widely accepted binary gender roles, characteristic of the nineteenth century. Characters in her early fictions such as Undine, Lyndall, Waldo and Gregory Rose, rather than representing simple, stereotypical gender figures (wholly male or female), are each a *blend* of traditional gender characteristics and, in this way, they break down the conventional constructions of binary gender models which were, and still are, widely accepted as the norm. This aspect of Schreiner's feminism, related to gender roles and their limitations, will be the focus of the present research and will be

contextualised within some understanding of gendered roles in the nineteenth century. The viability of this project is supported by the investigations into the subversion of gender roles in Schreiner's fiction done as early as 1989 by Carol Barash and appeared as a chapter in the book *Speaking of Gender* edited by the important feminist theorist Elaine Showalter. However, apart from Barash's chapter, only a handful of other writings on the subject have been published, thus leaving a great deal of scope for further study.

In order to comprehend more fully the instances of gender subversion in Schreiner's fiction, it is necessary to have an understanding of the respective gender characteristics assigned to men and women during the nineteenth century – that is to say, some sense of the status quo that was being subverted. To aid such an understanding, the following pages will provide a brief history of gender roles in Victorian England. Due to the limited information available on gender roles in nineteenth-century South Africa, which is the setting both of Schreiner's own upbringing and most of her early fiction, this study will focus on gender roles in Britain as Schreiner herself was of (partial) British descent, and the settler societies throughout the British Empire generally modelled themselves on British society (Theron 2006, 7).

Victorian society had a patriarchal structure which held women in a subordinate position to that of men. Consequently, women had limited rights within society and were basically the property of their husbands. This structure was taken from Britain's rural model, according to which men were responsible for activities related to production while women were responsible for activities related to reproduction (Bédarida 1979, 117-118). With the industrial revolution and the replacement of many

of women's labours by technology, this model was rendered superfluous (Tosh 1998, 81). However, it served men's interests to maintain the status quo merely adapting it to a more urban setting and thus continuing the traditional patriarchal structure of British society (Bédarida 1979, 118). One marked difference between the old rural, and the new urban models was the more rigid separation of the working spheres of both men and women in the latter. While men belonged in the public sphere and looked after the family's financial interests, women dominated the private sphere and were involved in domestic tasks (Bédarida 1979, 118). The generalisations made below about the different situations of men and women refer specifically to the upper and middle classes, but the situation was more or less the same for the lower classes.

The principal reason the old rural patriarchal model survived was because it served men's interests. Limiting women to the domestic sphere meant that wives and daughters could look after men's affairs at home while they commuted to work every day (Tosh 1998, 81). Although not necessarily employed consciously, different strategies were utilised in order to ensure the restriction of women to the domestic sphere. One such strategy involved religion, and, specifically, the use of scripture to justify restricting women's lives to the home. On this point, John Tosh comments that "Evangelical doctrines of the family [were], in part, … a means of shoring up patriarchy at a time when its traditional material foundations were crumbling" (1998, 82).

Scientific support was also given for the patriarchal structure of society by referring to the biology of men and women. As the two sexes began to inhabit completely different spheres, women's place in the domestic sphere was ensured by attributing certain "natural" characteristics to them (Odubajo and Odubajo 2017, 9227). Thus, women's childbearing function meant that they were naturally associated with qualities such as

"caring and nurturing" and therefore, it was reasoned, better suited for home life (Theron 2006, 3). Although a few women, such as George Eliot and Florence Nightingale, were able to escape these rigid constraints, most lived out their lives confined to the domestic sphere (Bédarida 1979, 119). Conversely, men were free to dominate the public sphere due to their association with characteristics such as "authority, rationality [and] force" (Mendus and Rendall 1989, 3) as well as "self-control, hard work, and independence" (Tosh 1994, 183). The result was that men had much greater freedom, since their roles in society were not restricted by their biology as was the case for women:

> Men were the norm against which women and children [were] measured. Women were 'carriers' of gender, because their reproductive role was held to define their place in society and their character…. Even in the late Victorian heyday of scientific belief in sexual difference, little was made of men's distinctive biology and the character traits that might flow from it, compared with the volume of comment on women. (Tosh 1994, 180)

Furthermore, with the transition of England from an agrarian to an industrial society, the city and the world of commerce were regarded in a morally compromised light while the home was seen as a place of moral integrity, a safe haven from the corrupting influences of the world at large (Tosh 1998, 81). As a consequence, it was argued at the time that

> [t]he true function of women [was] to educate not only children, but men, to train a higher civilisation not the rising generation but the actual society. And to do this by diffusing the spirit of affection, of self-restraint, self-sacrifice, fidelity and purity … as mother, as wife, as sister, as daughter, as friend, as nurse, as teacher, as servant, as counsellor, as purifier, as example, in a word – as woman. (Harrison, 1891, cited in Stubbs 1979, 7)

This view of the home as a morally purifying influence was largely based on society's perception of women as "The Angel in the House", a widely used expression taken from the title of a poem (1854-63) by Coventry Patmore, which eventually came to

embody the ideal conception of Victorian womanhood. The term “Angel in the House” captured the sense of women as “pure and innocent but also helpless, weak, and, importantly, silenced. This [was] indeed the ideal of womanhood and wifehood in the nineteenth century, the very embodiment of the term ‘Victorian’" (Hoffman 2007, 266).

The importance that Victorian society placed on women’s innocence is most apparent in the attempts made to protect them from all matters relating to sex: “Not only was the weaker sex shielded against improper suggestions – above all sexual allusions, real or imagined – but any mention of their own sexuality was specifically supressed” (Schoeman 1991, 217). This practice was internalised by many women due to the reprisals they faced when they were sexually active outside of marriage, which included being labelled prostitutes and being deemed unfit to be wives and mothers (Odubajo and Odubajo 2017, 9228). Conversely, the expectations regarding men in such matters could be hypocritical. Promiscuity on the part of men was more tolerated, and extra-marital sex justified by referring to their biology and the sexually repressed natures of their wives who could not satisfy them (Odubajo and Odubajo 2017, 9225).

Because it was believed that women’s natural place was the home, they were educated accordingly. Women could not, at mid-century, attend university and study towards a degree; instead, the education made available to them was aimed at better equipping them to find husbands, thereby enabling them to fulfil their assigned destinies as wives and mothers. Skills which assisted women in achieving this goal included “dancing, deportment and an assortment of accomplishments” (Gordon and Nair 2003, 136). Due to the limited opportunities available for women to make a living, marriage was the most common choice as a means of subsistence that might involve little genuine affection: “[l]ove was never an emotional feeling; rather, it was a feeling

inspired by the financial security and social status a union could offer" (Odubajo and Odubajo 2017, 9227-9228). Women who did not marry would have had it doubly difficult, for not only would they have been pitied by society, but they would also have found few opportunities that could provide them with a proper living.

As already mentioned, the situation among the working classes was more or less the same. Most women were resigned to the restrictive life choices of being wives and mothers, while of those who worked, only a small number were married. Women who worked suffered the same subordinate treatment as their housewife sisters. Working women's wages were much lower than men's, and jobs for women were mostly restricted to domestic activities which could be divided into three groups: those who worked in factories, especially textile factories; those who worked as domestic servants; and those who worked as seamstresses or dress-makers (Bédarida 1979, 20).

Towards the end of the 1880s, greater equality between the sexes became an increasing demand of the so-called "New Woman". Although organised attempts at reforming women's place in society were launched only at the end of the nineteenth century, changes in the thinking about women and gender had in fact already begun in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Opposition to conventional ways of thinking about women's roles had started as early as 1792 with Mary Wollstonecraft's publication of her feminist philosophical work *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Other notable works over the following decades include William Thompson's *Appeal of One Half of the Human Race (*1825) and Barbara Bodichon's *A Brief Summary of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women* (1855) (Bédarida 1979, 16). However, "by far the best and most powerful plea for female emancipation

before the emergence of the New Women came in John Stuart Mill's *On the Subjection of Women* (1869)". Mills book became a kind of handbook for the feminist movement, and with its publication more organised and collective attempts were launched laying claim to greater freedom for women and rejecting narrow definitions of femininity available to them (Cunningham 1978, 7). Mill's attraction for the "New Woman" lay in his explanation that conventional gender roles for women were not the natural products of their biology, but social constructs, in a way that anticipated much later feminist theorists, as will be discussed below. "Women", Mill wrote:

> have always hitherto been kept, as far as regards spontaneous development, in so unnatural a state, that their nature cannot but have been greatly distorted and disguised; and so no one can safely pronounce that if women's nature was left to choose its direction as freely as men's, and if no artificial bent were attempted to be given to it except that required by the conditions of human society, and given to both sexes alike, there would be any material difference, or perhaps any difference at all, in the character and capacitates which would unfold themselves. (Cunningham 1978, 7-8)

It is important to note that the feminist movement began in the upper and middle classes and only later reached the lower classes. Furthermore, across all the classes we should not assume that their traditional position of subordination was insufferable to all women. Despite their inequality in marriage, the somewhat paradoxical role that women also played as the moral conscience and guardian of the family meant that many accepted their roles as mothers and wives and were proud of them (Bédarida 1979, 119). Although doubtless there must have been women who were dissatisfied and frustrated by the limited roles reserved for them within society, many were content in the domestic sphere and sought no change in their situation. This division in their ranks made the struggle for greater opportunities for women more difficult, since feminists not only had to contend with disapproval from men but often also from their own sex (Bédarida 1979, 120). Moreover, feminists themselves were divided between

those with more moderate leanings, who only wanted civil and political rights, and the extremists who wanted complete freedom which included equality between the sexes (Bédarida 1979, 17).

The feminist movement advocated greater equality for women on four fronts, namely legal, educational, political and sexual. The first civil right won by women was the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, which authorised divorce, although there were many restrictions involved and it was badly undermined by the double standards that it set for men and women, which were only removed in 1923 (Bédarida 1979, 121). Even greater inequality had existed with regard to property law, in terms of which, upon marriage, all of a woman's property became the possession of her husband (Bédarida 1979, 121). This was reformed in 1870 with the Married Women's Property Act, which returned all the wife's property to her (Bédarida 1979, 122). On the education front, two important changes took place towards the end of the century, so that for the first time not only secondary but also university education was made available to women. Thus,

> instead of having their horizons bounded by drawing-rooms and needlework, daughters of good families pursued their studies, went to Oxford and Cambridge, travelled, rode bicycles, played tennis and took up eurhythmics. Some launched out into the professions, into medicine …, journalism and above all teaching. (Bédarida 1979, 122)

It was on the political front that women made the most advances. The National Society for Women's Suffrage, founded in 1867, was one of the first associations that demanded the vote for women (Bédarida 1979, 122), and although their ultimate aim of the universal franchise was long denied them, other successes testified to the progress they made in local government, which included winning the right to serve on various municipal, county and district councils and eventually school boards (Bédarida

1979, 123). The causes that women were most actively involved in, however, were related to domestic matters, demonstrating that traditional notions about their proper place were slow in changing. This led to the establishment of a more militant feminist association, “The Women’s Social and Political Union” (WSPU), led by Emmeline Pankhurst (Bédarida 1979, 123). The members of the WSPU, known as suffragettes, made themselves heard through public demonstrations and hunger strikes (Bédarida 1979, 123). Although the publicity raised by these methods increased awareness of the cause of women’s enfranchisement, the often violent means that were utilised cost them many supporters and it was only with the First World War that women’s place in society was re-evaluated (Bédarida 1979, 123). Finally, with regard to sexual emancipation, the suffragettes spoke out against the strict morals that were imposed on women and criticised the double standards that existed between the sexes, reflected in Christabel’s Pankhurst’s famous slogan: “Votes for Women and Chastity for Men” (Bédarida 1979, 124). Amongst the extremists in the suffragette movement, marriage itself came under the most radical scrutiny, with some advocating relationships based on free love (Bédarida 1979, 124).

The changes in British values, steadily gaining momentum in the way outlined above, were reflected in the literature of the nineteenth century. At the height of patriarchal Britain, most works even those not directly concerned with the relationships between men and women, ended in marriage and promoted the idea that true happiness for women was to be found in family life, carrying out the duties associated with wife and motherhood (Stubbs 1979, 26).This belief that the domestic sphere was the natural place of women, and the public sphere the natural place of men, is perfectly demonstrated by Tennyson’s long narrative poem “The Princess” (1847):

> Man for the field and woman for the hearth
> Man for the sword, and for the needle she;
> Man with the head, and woman with the heart;
> Man to command, and woman to obey;
> All else confusion. (V.437-441)

Another important poem, already referred to for its historical representation of woman's idealised purity in the Victorian era, is "The Angel in the House" (1854-63) by Coventry Patmore. Written for the poet's wife, Emily, the poem presents a romanticised version of their courtship. The significance of these works, for our purposes, is in the detailed picture they offer of the Victorian ideal of womanhood enshrined in the marital relationship.

Although courtship and marriage were the most common subjects of the novels of the period, in order to provide some variety, other plot devices were often introduced, such as "seduction, betrayal, adultery and shameful pregnancies" (Cunningham 1978, 20); however, these also served the purpose of instilling some moral lesson which ultimately upheld traditional Victorian values. These conventions are also to be found in the fiction associated with the "New Woman", but there was a radical difference in the way they were handled (Cunningham 1978, 20). Thus, the idea that women had to be pure and chaste was upheld in more conservative fiction through the condemning of their sexual infringements (Cunningham 1978, 20-21). In this tradition of the nineteenth-century novel:

> …sexual misdemeanours are more usually treated as hideous aberrations and are approached with uniform gravity and a stern moral frown. The fallen woman was a stain on society and had to be punished, either by the intolerable pangs of conscience or by death – preferably both. (Cunningham 1978, 21)

A vivid testament to how such literature could be used to assert the values of Victorian society is provided by Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861). In the narrator's address to the reader, the importance of staying morally pure is extolled:

> Lady — wife — mother! should you ever be tempted to abandon your home… whatever trials may be the lot of your married life, though they may magnify themselves to your crushed spirit as beyond the endurance of woman to bear, *resolv*e to bear them: fall down upon your knees and pray to be enabled to bear them; pray for patience; pray for strength to resist the demon that would tempt you to escape; bear unto death, rather than forfeit your fair name and your fair conscience; for be assured that the alternative, if you do rush on to it, will be found worse than death. (Cunningham 1978, 23)

The treatment of femininity in literature saw a radical change with the publication of Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847). Widely recognised as one of the first feminist heroines, Jane Eyre undermined the Victorian conception of femininity as well as the traditional romantic relationship between men and women. The eponymous heroine subverts the submissive, passive picture of women that was the norm, through her autonomous and self-assertive nature. Her deviance from the conventional heroine immediately comes to the fore at the start of the novel when, still just a child, she speaks out against her aunt and the unfair, cruel treatment she has received at her hands. From here on, she experiences deeply felt anger whenever she feels herself the victim of injustice, in a way that undercuts the conventional image of women. Her fiery and passionate nature, displayed through her anger, is also reflected in the even more startling portrait of Rochester's mad wife. Bertha acts out in heightened form Jane's own unorthodox rage, and in this way shatter the traditional representation of women as subdued and docile, as Gilbert and Gubar explain:

> Bertha … function[s] as Jane's dark double *throughout* the governess's stay at Thornfield. Specifically, every one of Bertha's appearances – or, more accurately, her manifestations – has been associated with an experience (or repression) of anger on Jane's part. (1979, 360)

Evidence for this analysis can be found in a number of instances in the novel. When Jane feels resentment at Rochester's disclosure of his sexual experiences, Bertha

attempts to set fire to him while he is sleeping; also, when Jane feels uncertain about her pending marriage to Rochester, Bertha tears up her wedding gown and veil; finally, Jane's desire to destroy Thornfield is carried out by Bertha who burns down the house and kills herself in the process. Jane's unconventionally autonomous and self-assertive nature also shows itself in her speech to Rochester about the stifling effects on women of their relegation to the domestic sphere. She rejects the idea that women are naturally calm and passive and that their natures are inherently the opposite of those of men:

> Women are supposed to be very calm generally – but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer, and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (Brontë [1847] 2007, 109)

Jane's forthright exchange with Rochester and the ease with which she speaks her mind touch on another subversive aspect of her femininity: her insistence on a marriage based on love and equality. Despite Rochester's higher social standing, Jane speaks to him as if he were her equal. When she learns that he is already married to Bertha, she breaks off the engagement, because she will not sacrifice her principles for him. Correspondingly, later on when St. John proposes to her, she refuses him on the grounds that she cannot enter into a marriage that is devoid of passion and love. It is, more than anything else, by refusing to settle for a marriage that is not based on mutual love and equality that Brontë asserted Jane's unconventionality, since the norm was a marriage based on subordination and financial security.

After the publication of *Jane Eyre*, writing about heroines who subverted Victorian notions about model womanhood became more common as the subject matter of major and minor writers. However, Charlotte Brontë did more than just provide the pattern for challenging traditional notions regarding femininity. She also predicted the difficulty women would have in imagining some other outlet for their energies outside the sphere of service, which was borne out later in the century, both by the feminist struggle itself and the literature that reflected it. Despite the ground-breaking feminist nature of Charlotte Brontë's writings, she was limited by her adherence to the conventional pattern whereby all her heroines' problems, both in *Jane Eyre* and in her other novels, are solved by marriage. As Patricia Stubbs says,

> … the overwhelming emphasis on the need to love and to be loved finally submerges all the other essentially feminist issues – the problems of women's employment, their economic dependence, their restriction to a purely domestic range of activities and ambitions, the isolation of the self-supporting woman. All these problems are resolved, or rather simply disappear, on the marriage of the heroine. (1979, 29)

Many female novelists who succeeded Charlotte Brontë would grapple with the same problem. Amongst others, Virginia Woolf, much later, wrote about her own struggle with overcoming traditional conceptions of femininity which stifled her writing and supressed her creativity:

> For, as I found, directly I put pen to paper, you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex. And all these questions, according to the Angel in the House, cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women; they must charm, they must conciliate, they must – to put it bluntly – tell lies if they are to succeed. Thus, whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her. She died hard. (Woolf [1942] 1961), 203)

Olive Schreiner's fictional works were written in this tradition. Although no record has yet been found of her having read Charlotte Brontë's works, there are striking

similarities between Schreiner's and the older novelist's heroines that suggest the likelihood of some exposure to Brontë's works. Both writers highlight the radical nature of their heroines by providing, alongside them, a more traditional character to serve as their opposite. In *The Story of an African Farm*, Em serves this purpose while in *Jane Eyre* this role is fulfilled by Helen Burns. In addition, both heroines refuse to capitulate to treatment that they deem unfair and both are steadfast in their refusal of a marriage that is not based on love and equality. But together with the radical aspects of Bronte's work, some of its limitations are equally to be found in Schreiner, whose fiction reflects, not only a rethinking about women's place in society, but also the limitations of imagining some other outlet for her heroine's energies. This shortcoming was, very possibly, an unavoidable consequence of Schreiner's place in history, at a liminal point, between past modes of thinking about women that were increasingly questioned, and an alternative still only in prospect, and very far from clear or certain. Despite the historical limitations of Schreiner's thinking, she was to a remarkable degree also able to challenge certain conventions, in ways that were vastly ahead of her time. This is seen particularly in her subversion of the binary gender constructions so deeply entrenched and unquestioned in her own time and well into the next century, when key developments in social and literary theory placed gender under a new spotlight. It is partly this theoretical perspective – which seems a natural extension (even fulfilment) of Schreiner's own early initiatives – that will be used to explore the instances of gender subversion in Schreiner's fiction. In the following section, a brief account will be provided of Gender and Queer Theory as the framework for discussing Schreiner's fictional treatment of gender in the following chapters.

Gender Theory has its origins in the 1970s and 80s under the influence of second wave feminism when the stability of the category of gender began receiving more

attention. One of the main theories in the field of Gender studies distinguishes between a person's "sex" and their "gender". This theory is in direct opposition to the naturalistic view of gender, common in the nineteenth century, which propounds the idea that one's biology is definitive (Bradley 2007, 16-17). In other words, differences between the sexes are seen as natural and permanent and arise from their biological sex. The opposing view, the sex/gender distinction, distinguishes between a person's "sex" and their "gender" and was first proposed by Ann Oakley in 1972 in her book *Sex, Gender and Society* which argues that "gender is cultural and socially constructed", as opposed to sex which is natural and biological (Bradley 2007, 15). Thus, if gender is a social construct, one can conclude that there is nothing permanent or fixed about it.

The traditional idea that gender roles were inherent and natural was supported by the naturalistic view of gender according to which women's childbearing function and their hormones made them better suited for a place in the home; while men's original role as hunters, their hormones, specifically testosterone, and their greater physical strength over women made them better suited for the role of provider for the family (Bradley 2007, 17). This distinction between the roles of men and women, based on what was believed to be their inherent gender characteristics, is important as it demonstrates how both gender and the roles assigned to the different genders were social constructs. This had also been the case a hundred years earlier, although even then the view was beginning to be questioned, precisely by forward-thinking figures like Olive Schreiner. Significantly, it was on the relationship between gender and the social roles of men and women that Schreiner focussed in her work *Women and Labour* (1911), more than half a century before the field of gender studies began receiving any critical attention. Her pioneering approach to gender is testified to in the following extract:

> … for the present, we have no adequate scientific data from which to draw any conclusion, and any attempt to divide the occupations in which male and female intellects and wills should be employed, must be to attempt a purely artificial and arbitrary division: a division not more rational and scientific than an attempt to determine by the colour of his eyes and the shape and strength of his legs, whether a lad should be an astronomer or an engraver. ([1911] 1998, 60)

Rather than seen as the cultural constructions that they are, Oakley argues that gender characteristics are mistakenly viewed as natural because of what she refers to as "gender socialisation" (Bradley 2007, 17). Gender socialisation refers to the fact that one is, from a young age, constantly being *taught* to emulate characteristics associated with either masculinity or femininity in all the different areas of life, such as family life, school, work and the media (Bradley 2007, 17). This idea that gender is something that one is taught and then re-enacts was further elaborated by the feminist philosopher Judith Butler, who, like Oakley, asserted that there is no true or fixed category of gender. Rather, the categories which to us seem fixed are merely social conventions which are constructed through the repetition of various acts that we carry out on a daily basis and it is these acts that have come to be synonymous with the different genders. As Butler states,

> [G]ender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylised repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylisation of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (2004, 903)

Linking up with Butler's claims was an important study by Parsons and Bales (1955) on the link between gender and the characteristics assigned to men and women. In the study, the relationship between the economic structure of America in the 1950s and the different roles fulfilled by men and women at the time was analysed. The

findings showed that the competitive economic climate of the time required men and women to fulfil specific roles which emphasised the constructed nature of gender roles:

> [M]en needed to be aggressive, ruthless and intellectual. By contrast the family also needed women to carry out expressive roles of caring and nurturing, looking after children and providing for people's physical and emotional needs. (Bradley 2007, 16)

Thus, the "punishment" of those who do their gender "wrong" (Butler 2004, 903) will no longer be a problem as there will be no fixed or permanent point of reference when it comes to gender. It is the implication that, far from fixed, gender is something fluid and changeable that will be the cornerstone of the present study. Once the artificiality of gender is accepted, and it is acknowledged that there is no inherent link between one's gender and one's biological sex then "*man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one" (Butler 1990, 6).

Queer Theory goes even further in this direction than Gender Theory. The central argument of Queer Theory is that there is no "true" sexuality, a position that was always held by heterosexuality, and that there is no "stable relationship between biological sexuality…, gender, and sexual desire" (Bertens 2014, 202). Queer Theory has a wider scope than gay and lesbian studies and encompasses everything that deals with destabilising areas that have been accepted as natural, even gay and lesbian categories (Bertens 2014, 202). Its concerns thus encompass:

> …forms of sexual self-expression such as cross-dressing that cut across existing gender lines, sexual fantasies that are never put into practice, but also phenomena such as hermaphroditism or the desire to become female (if you are male) that similarly call into question the basis for what seem 'natural' categorisations. (Bertens 2014, 202)

"Deviant" genders and sexual identities, such as those mentioned above, have always been denied existence because in these cases "gender does not follow from sex…

and the practices of desire do not 'follow' from either sex or gender" (Butler 1990, 17). On this subject, gender and sexuality, Judith Butler writes extensively in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), drawing on Foucault who argued that sexuality is also a social construct (Bradley 2007, 18). Thus, as gender, one's sexual identity is established through the repetition of certain sexual acts which appear to be coherent and stable. Heterosexuality along with all forms of sexuality are equally constructed and there is no sexuality which can be said to be natural. On the point of seeing gender as a social construct, Jacque Derrida explains that Western society has, through the ages, tended to make sense of the world by viewing it in terms of binaries, think about the categories heterosexuality/homosexuality or man/woman, and subsequently developed a strategy, "deconstruction", through which to subvert this binary way of thinking about the world (Bradley 2007, 19). Binaries seem true and stable because they have become so established through time thus making it difficult to imagine alternatives which fall outside these binaries. Feminist studies such as Queer and Gender theory have destabilised such rigid ways of thinking by taking their areas of interest subjects that do not neatly fit into this rigid binary system.

The importance of breaking down these false binary gender constructions lies in making the field of gender studies more inclusive. This is demonstrated by the early feminists' attempts to formulate a stable and fixed category of the term "woman" in order to present a unified front against masculine oppression. However, this categorisation served only to reinforce further the restriction and narrowing of possibilities within the category of "woman", which is what these feminists accused patriarchal society of establishing, and what they had tried to escape. Instead of achieving unification via inclusion, they only reinforced alienation and privation. This led to the exclusion of many women, since "… the insistence upon the coherence and

unity of the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of 'women' are constructed" (Butler 1990, 14). Thus, early feminist aims of formulating a fixed female identity contradicted their aim of freedom from oppression. The continuation of a binary gender system is a way in which identities are restricted, and individuals who do not neatly fit into the categories of male or female are not given consideration in the field of literary studies any more than in other fields. As an alternative to this, I believe it would be illuminating to investigate how the fluid nature of gender, which has only recently been given the attention it deserves, was already being explored in the nineteenth century by Olive Schreiner.

The following study of gender in Olive Schreiner's two early novels will comprise three chapters. In Chapter One, focussed on *Undine*, the nature of gender issues will be investigated primarily through the eponymous heroine. An attempt will be made to identify and analyse instances of gender subversion in this very early novel, which will form the basis for exploring in subsequent chapters how Schreiner's ideas on gender developed or were adapted in her next novel, *The Story of an African Farm.* It has been argued (Rive 1972, 236) that Schreiner wrote the rough drafts of the plots of her three major fictional works, *Undine*, *The Story of an African Farm and From Man to Man*, simultaneously. Rive also states in his article "Olive Schreiner: A Critical Study and a Checklist" (1972) that due to the many similarities between *African Farm* and *Undine,* "[i]t is a reasonable hypothesis that *Undine* served indirectly as a model for *African Farm* and that the latter book was initially *Undine* rewritten, which while retaining some of the original incidents and characteristics became a qualitatively different book" (236). More important than the similarities between the two novels, it will be argued, is the evidence they give of Schreiner's creativity in this respect,

evolving and expanding her earlier work so as to produce a far more ambitious treatment of gender in *The Story of an African Farm*.

In addition, an attempt will be made in this chapter to link instances of gender subversion in Schreiner's earliest fiction to facts we have about her own life, since *Undine,* along with Schreiner's other fictional work, seems to have grown out of her own experiences, as documented in Schoeman's biography (1991). The validity and usefulness of such an approach is suggested by Cherry Clayton: "[h]er storytelling impulse, from a very early age, was a shaping impulse in which the amorphousness and difficulty of experience could be transmuted into narratives, whether they were oral compositions to invisible listeners, or the more self-consciously chosen genres of her later writing career"' (1985, 35).

After the preliminary discussion of *Undine* in Chapter One, attention will shift to a more extended and detailed examination of *The Story of an African Farm*. Because of its greater complexity, the discussion of gender subversion in this work will be dealt with in two separate chapters focussing on *female* characterisation and then on *male* characterisation in the next. Firstly, in Chapter Two, Lyndall will be examined for the ways in which she rebels against society's constructed view of how women should think and act, in the course of which she exhibits characteristics traditionally accepted as masculine, thereby subverting conventional female gender constructions. Furthermore, an attempt will be made to analyse Schreiner's depiction of the psychological effects of traditional gender roles, and particularly the price that is paid for rebelling against those roles, as reflected in the outcome of her struggle.

In the novel, Lyndall's cousin Em is presented as a model of conventional femininity, who by the technique of juxtaposition, makes Lyndall's rebellion look more striking.

Thus, Em will also be a focus of attention, in her antithetical relationship to Lyndall and her characterisation as an extreme of femininity through her conformity to gender roles of submissiveness and silence. It will be argued, however, that Em is far from a simple or "flat" piece of characterisation, only serving to highlight aspects of Lyndall, for the novel suggests that conformity to gender roles can be as troubling and conflicted as rebellion. It is possible that in the critical tradition around the novel, the characterisation of Em has been misjudged and underestimated; by the end of the novel, it will be suggested, she has revealed unexpected complexities and ways of dealing with gendered roles that may involve its own kind of subversion – not as radical as Lyndall's, but more successful.

In Chapter Three, instances of male gender subversion will be examined in the characters of Gregory Rose and Waldo Faber. First to be investigated will be how the characterisation of Gregory Rose deviates from conventional masculine gender roles, with specific focus given to his change from Em's lover to Lyndall's nurse and the motivations for this change in him. Whereas Lyndall adopts many of the features of stereotypical masculinity, Gregory reverses this, and takes on the identity of a woman, in Schreiner's most daring subversion of gender conventions. Yet, for all its unexpectedness, Gregory's gender transition does not match in complexity Schreiner's treatment of her other male character, Waldo, who will be the final focus of attention. In response to the constrictions of traditional gender roles, Waldo does not simply exchange one for the other (as both Gregory and Lyndall do), but rather rejects both. It will be argued that Waldo represents what is perhaps the most radical of all possible subversions of gender, in his search for an alternative outside these fixed categories altogether. It is exactly *where* he finds such an escape from the artificial constructs of gender, that the study will finally make clear.

Chapter 1

Gender Subversion in *Undine*

Schreiner first started writing *Undine* in June 1873, at the young age of eighteen, while staying with her brother and sister in New Rush (Kimberley); three years later she completed the novel while staying at Gannahoek, near Cradock (Rive 1972, 234). Although it is often referred to as a flawed piece of writing, a critique she most probably shared since she decided not to have it published, it is an important piece as it gives us insights into the beginnings of many of the key themes and ideas that run throughout her work. It is generally accepted that *The Story of an African Farm* is *Undine* rewritten (Rive 1972, 236). This might be put down to her decision not to publish *Undine*, which possibly made her feel at ease about borrowing ideas and themes from her first book and incorporating them into *The Story of an African Farm.* Focussing specifically on one of these themes, the following chapter will examine her first, rather tentative, subversion of gender in *Undine*. The treatment of this theme in the early novel will then be compared and contrasted to its presentation in *The Story of an African Farm,* in both this and later chapters. Furthermore, an attempt will also be made to link Schreiner's fiction with events in her life in order to show that the issues that concerned her in her novels were often born out of her own experiences which give many scenes a credibility and complexity that they might otherwise not have had.

Throughout *Undine*, its eponymous heroine repeatedly subverts traditional nineteenth-century notions of femininity. On the opening page, Undine is described as sitting in "a queer little fashion of her own" (5, 2004; all subsequent references will be to this edition) and in the course of the novel, this word, "queer", as well as words such as

"strange" (15), "ungodly" (18) and "evil" (18) are repeatedly used to describe her. Furthermore, Undine's association with the water-nymph of the same name, from Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's fairy tale, further emphasises her otherness (Monsman 1991, 37). The view that Undine is based on Schreiner's perception of her own childhood self is supported by Ruth Parkin-Gounelas:

> From childhood, Schreiner felt herself to be a 'queer little girl', to use the phrase that appeared as the early title of *Undine*. A sense of otherness, an estrangement from the model of feminine behaviour offered to her, arouses in Undine, with her physical daring and her inclination to speak out, the kind of violent rebellion that it did in Jane Eyre and Maggie Tulliver. (1991, 85)

Undine's "queerness" is rooted in her deviance from rigid nineteenth-century gender roles available to women, and her frequent exhibition of characteristics generally regarded at the time as more masculine. Instead of being obedient and docile which was regarded as the norm for women, young Undine's character is strong-willed and unruly. Her nonconformity is first seen when she arrives late, first at prayers and then at breakfast, leading her governess to chastise her: "[r]eally, Undine, you are the hardest child to manage" (7). Undine's actions are so far removed from traditional ideas of feminine decorum that at times they can be described as tomboyish: for example, when her pet monkey, Socrates, climbs onto the roof of the house, Undine fetches a ladder and goes after him (17), giving no thought to feminine propriety. The anomalous nature of this action is referred to in the description of her parents' and guardian's response: "[n]ever were worthy parents and instructors, on their return from a quiet Sabbath ramble, met by so horrific and wrath-rousing a sight" (18). The words "horrific" and "wrath-rousing" speak to the unnaturalness of this sight and to the deep-rooted nature of gender roles during the Victorian era.

Undine is also neglectful of her appearance. She forgets to wear her "kappie", prompting her governess to ask the question: "[d]o you wish to ruin your complexion…?" (11). The governess's concern for Undine's complexion is suggestive of the Victorian inclination to prioritise appearance over intelligence in women. This focus on appearance is further stressed when, while daydreaming next to the ocean, Undine is interrupted by Cousin Jonathan and "… brought … back to the disagreeable human world, in which wild hair, wet clothes, and bare feet were terribly disgraceful things" (27). The greatest emphasis on the importance of women's appearance is, however, given by Albert Blair who explains that "[t]here are few things which I admire less than a slovenly woman. If a woman cares to retain the affection of those about her, she will always be particular as to her dress" (71).

Yet Undine's most significant aberrance from the expectations of women is not so much her lack of interest in her appearance as her subversion of the expectation that women should have no serious thoughts or interests, their sole preoccupations being marriage and motherhood. Undine upsets this expectation through her exhibition of strong views and her contemplative nature, especially with regard to religious doctrine. As a child, Undine grapples with the notion of a benevolent Christian God who damns people to hell if they act sinfully. Her unorthodox approach to religion is reflected in her words:

> …I don't want to go to heaven, and if God wants to, he can send me to hell and I will never again ask him not to, *never*. I know I'm very wicked, but I'm not half so wicked or cruel as he is. Nothing is, not even the devil. The devil is glad when we go to hell, but he did not make us on purpose to send us there, and he did not make hell, and he did not make himself, and I'm sorry for him. I believe he tries to be good and God won't let him, that's what I believe. (12-13)

However, Undine's true unconventionality lies not so much in the nature of her religious beliefs, but in the fact that she has beliefs at all, and in the fervent manner

with which she delivers her opinions and defends these beliefs. Schreiner herself was a religious sceptic, which might explain the powerful nature of Undine's speeches regarding religion. It is possibly because Schreiner was drawing on her own experiences that the speeches she gives Undine have such urgency and authenticity. Schreiner attributed her own scepticism to the death of her baby sister, Ellie, when she was six years old, which left her incapable of believing in a God who was responsible for the death of innocents (Gordon 2017, 185). To fill the vacuum left by her loss of religion, Schreiner discovered the philosopher Herbert Spencer's *First Principles* (1862) at the age of seventeen. Karel Schoeman has suggested that "Spencer's value to [Schreiner] at that stage of her life lay in his making her aware of possibilities besides the two extremes of dogmatic Christianity and 'blank atheism', and of a meaningful alternative creed by which to shape her life" (1991, 193). Significantly, Undine is also mentioned reading *First Principles*. By the second chapter, the older Undine's fixation on religion seems to have been alleviated, perhaps reflecting the inner peace Spencer's writings on the subject had brought to Schreiner herself.

The general reaction in the novel to Undine's freethinking nature reflects the inconsistencies of the Victorian value system, which had different expectations of men and women. This is brought to the fore in Miss Mell's response to Undine's controversial ideas: "For clever learned men it's all very well, but a stupid child like her ought to be well whipped and fed on bread and water for six months…." (43). Undine's brother, Frank, expresses ideas of a similar nature when he says: "It's all very well to laugh… but she is awfully bad, much worse [than] I am. She is only a little girl and she has no right to have thoughts at all" (20). Such double standards were typical of patriarchal Victorian society which prescribed that women's lives should centre on the

family and the home, and any ideas and behaviour threatening to upset this order were firmly rejected.

At the start of the novel, Undine is constantly plagued by guilt over her inability to act according to both biblical and social prescriptions set out for women. Although the idea that she is “wicked” troubles her, she is unable to conform to the will of others or to reform herself. This is seen in her declaration to her governess: “I know I’m wicked and I don’t care, and I don’t care what becomes of my soul, and I’m not afraid of anything” (18). As with her fierce defence of her religious beliefs, Undine’s unyielding proclamation is clear evidence of an assertive nature, subverting the view that women should be meek and docile. Despite her daring statement, however, it is clear that her unconventional nature troubles her. After this outburst, for example, she is described as walking away “with almost a smile upon her face” (18), which would seem to indicate her satisfaction at standing up for herself, but once in her room she cries bitterly and exclaims: “Oh, I wish I was dead! I wish I was dead! There is nobody like me, and nobody loves me” (18). Thus, despite her statements to the contrary, Undine is clearly disturbed by her rebellious nature. Her feelings of otherness (“There is nobody like me”) cause her to feel isolated from the people around her. Her loneliness is so overwhelming that it drives her to get up in the middle of the night and seek out her stepsisters’ room where, in her need to feel close to someone, she takes hold of one of their small feet, and finds comfort in the fact that it is “soft and warm and full of life” (8). In this, one can see the unsettling psychological effects of too narrow a definition of the feminine norm: any deviation from it, such as Undine displays, will be experienced as sinful and guilt-inducing. In this respect, it is interesting to note that Schreiner’s later character Lyndall does not experience this same conflict between her personal impulses and public expectations of her. Although she may have other kinds

of uncertainty and distress, she is steadfast in her belief in herself and the rightness of her actions, and does not allow the opinions or criticisms of others to interfere with this belief. As will be illustrated elsewhere in this chapter, it seems that in the later novel Schreiner chose to downplay this particular form of self-conflict by dividing between two separate characters the contradictory inclinations felt by Undine: the one being to rebel (which will later be given to Lyndall), and the other to conform (given to Em). Although *The Story of an African Farm* is by general consent the better of the two novels, the fact that in the earlier work these two opposing inclinations are felt by one character is a credit to the complexity of *Undine*. The dilemma experienced by Undine illustrates more realistically the trouble that women had in this period, torn between rebelling against and conforming to society's expectations of them.

Chapter Two of the novel finds Undine living in England with her grandparents, after her mother's death, and although a few years have passed since the opening scenes, her wilful and resolute nature has not faltered. She stands up to her very belligerent grandfather and expresses her resolution not to attend church, feeling that it would be hypocritical to go when she does not agree with what the Bible propounds. However, after an exchange of fierce words with him (35), Undine relents and agrees to go to church, once more reflecting Schreiner's own childhood experiences. Like Undine, she had also refused to attend church, but eventually relented in order to appease her family (Gordon 2017, 186). Although Undine feels bitterness at being made to go to church, she also sees this as her deserved punishment for a rebellious nature. Thus, on the one hand, she is tormented by having to accept a subservient role, and on the other, plagued by her self-assertive nature. She reflects on this dilemma in a significant passage:

> … [She] herself could hardly have traced the gyration of the thoughts that were tossing in her own small head, but the result was an unalterable determination that she would not go to chapel. It was her duty, yet she could not go, she thought; and wondered wearily if she were always to be afflicted with senses of duty driving her into paths where no one else would or could walk. (30)

Undine is torn between submitting to the will of others, and thereby conforming to the idea of docile femininity, and following her own will. Her paradoxical preoccupation is something which she will struggle with throughout the novel and which Schreiner herself struggled with all her life. As Ruth Parkin-Gounelas explains, "[t]he claims of the self in relation to those of duty became an obsessional subject both in her correspondence and in her novels" (1991, 89). Schreiner later resolved this conflict in *The Story of an African Farm* by creating two characters who separately exhibit a different aspect of Undine's conflicted character. On the one hand, Lyndall is self-assured in her rebellion and never falters in her belief that standing up against inequality is her duty. Em, on the other hand, appears unquestioning, subservient and dutiful.

What finally gives Undine the fortitude to stop going to chapel permanently is her experience of the hypocrisy and gossiping of the churchgoing women of the village, Miss Mell and Mrs Goodman. Undine's disillusionment with the nature of women clearly comes to the fore when she exclaims: "…I wish I was not a woman. I hate women; they are horrible and disgusting, and I wish I had never been born rather than to be one" (26). She finds herself distanced from other women, and identifying more with men, testified to by her use of masculine references when reflecting on her own conduct: "…if a man is unfortunate enough to have ideas of his own, he had best keep them to himself" (20). That Undine should align herself in this way with the masculine gender might have to do with the greater freedom that men were allowed by society

as well as traits such as power and assertiveness which were commonly seen as masculine attributes and which at least part of her longed for. The kind of feminine hypocrisy that Undine is reacting against is also found in Schreiner's later work *From Man to Man,* in the person of Veronica, whose jealousy drives her to spread salacious stories about Bertie. All these depictions of small-minded and spiteful women are possibly based on Schreiner's real-life experience. In a letter she wrote during her stay in Dordrecht (1871) she commented, "I get so weary of personalities; always that, nothing else, between women" (Schoeman 1991, 230). Schreiner's distaste for the superficial nature of women's preoccupations is clearly reflected here, although one should also keep in mind that the restriction of woman to the home and the denial of their participation in public life greatly contributed to what might often have seemed a vapid existence.

In Chapter Two of *Undine*, we are introduced to Aunt Margaret, who, unlike Undine, unquestioningly conforms with the feminine standards set by society. She is the epitome of conventional femininity both in appearance and behaviour, and through this helps to emphasise the extent of Undine's otherness. In an analogous way Em in *The Story of an African Farm,* who is similar to Aunt Margaret in her conventional femininity, serves the same purpose of juxtaposition with the main character. Em highlights Lyndall's departure from what was regarded as "normal" female behaviour, just as Aunt Margaret highlights Undine's deviance. Aunt Margaret is described as having "the influence of sunshine on all [she] touch[ed]", and her "golden hair", "big blue eyes" and "white dress" (19-20) seem to create a perfect vision of Victorian purity and innocence, what Coventry Patmore called "the angel in the house". Furthermore, Aunt Margaret is not prone to serious thinking or reflection, simply accepting what society puts forward. Upon being questioned by Undine on the benefits of going to church,

she is hard-pressed to come up with any; however, she insists on going, because it is her duty: “If once we listen to our own hearts and use our reason, we go away from God” (21). Aunt Margaret’s position is in complete opposition to Undine’s, but conforms to the Victorian emphasis on meekness and obedience in women. By contrast, Undine gives considerable thought to her religious beliefs, as has been noted, questioning what society advances and following her own reasoning. This point is made clear when she remarks, “I wish you could feel as I do, that our Father will let nothing he made be lost forever. As long as I believe as you do I could not love him, nor serve him; but since I have left off looking to the Bible, and listen to what he says in my soul, I love him and I am happy” (21).

As this indicates, Aunt Margaret is Undine’s foil: an epitome of femininity who serves to highlight Undine’s deviance from the feminine norm. Aunt Margaret also resembles the conventional Victorian heroine in her prioritising of romantic love above all else. In this way, once again, she also resembles Em in *The Story of an African Farm*, whose love for Gregory Rose also becomes her sole consideration and joy in life. However, the cost to women of centring their lives on this single aspect can be observed in the aftermath of the death of Aunt Margaret’s betrothed. When Frank dies, she completely loses her sanity, starkly conveyed by the scene in which she is observed by Undine shortly after receiving the news:

> The door of [her aunt’s] own room stood half open, but she only glanced in, and was just leaving it when her ear caught a sound from the corner near the window. There, with the sunlight streaming full over its yellow hair, crouched a naked human figure. The knees were drawn up till the chin rested on them, and one arm was clasped tight round them; the other was stretched out, and one finger pointed to a crack in the boards. The eyebrows were drawn down till the eyes were hardly visible, but they opened slightly every time the mouth twitched nervously to one side or the other. (40)

The effect of a total breakdown that her fiancé's death has on Aunt Margaret can best be understood in the light of gender roles in the Victorian era which prescribed that a woman's exclusive function was to be a wife or a mother. Because he alone gave her life any purpose or meaning, his loss deprives her of them, and with them, her sanity. As her husband, he would have enabled her to realise her destiny of becoming a wife and a mother, and in losing him she loses her opportunity to fulfil these roles. Seen in this light, it is unsurprising that she reacts as she does, as so much of her future happiness rested on her marriage to him. It could thus be said that Aunt Margaret is a victim of the limited female Victorian gender roles, and that her madness illustrates the terrible price of feminine self-denial – of any fulfilment or identity – outside the role of service to others. Madness of this kind will in fact become a recurring motif in the novel, as both Undine and Alice Brown suffer similar breakdowns once they lose their role of service. It is possible to argue that, for Schreiner, such suffering was always a potential consequence of gender roles. In using madness to figure the dark underside of the Victorian feminine ideal, Olive Schreiner shows her relationship to a general literary preoccupation of the day with mental instability in women's lives (Gilbert and Gubar 1979).

As argued above and in conformity with the Victorian value system, Aunt Margaret's life revolves around her betrothed, Frank. Undine initially seems to rebel against this Victorian convention. She clearly does not make marriage and motherhood her main priorities: "No little party or picnic, however heart-subduing in person or purse the gentleman who were to be there, could ever awaken in her the faintest enthusiasm" (42-43). Undine also turns down two proposals of marriage, the first from Harry Blair and the second from his father, George Blair. Furthermore, after the latter's proposal, she expresses how far from her mind are any thoughts of domestic life:

> The idea of being any man's wife, of bearing any man's children, was absurd enough to her, to whom a lover was only a reality of the imagination, to be adored, worshipped, and endowed with every perfection mental and physical, but not to be seen, clothed in flesh and blood; just as we dream of heaven, but would laugh to scorn the man who offered to show it us. (59)

Significantly, however, despite the contempt Undine expresses for marriage, she clearly has an exalted view of romantic love, as indicated by her musings on Aunt Margaret and Frank's prospective marriage:

> She [Aunt Margaret] had reason to be happy, Undine thought; in a few months more he [Frank] will have finished his studies and was to settle as a doctor in Greenwood, and they were to be married; reason enough, but so had most women. How glorious it would be when she, too, was one! (38)

In other words, for all her questioning of conventional gender roles, Undine's ideas regarding love prove to be very traditional. This further evidence of her contradictory and conflicted response to the social norms which she both subverts and yet also clings to in some forms, suggests that at the time of the novel's composition, Schreiner herself was only tentatively exploring the possibility of gender subversion. Undine's incomplete commitment to gender liberation may reflect this tentativeness of Schreiner, in vivid contrast to her subsequent character, Lyndall, whose total rejection of these conventions perhaps indicates the more complete conviction felt by Schreiner herself at that later stage.

Evidence of Undine's conventional approach to love is witnessed upon her meeting Albert Blair, when her radical nature falters and she regresses to the stereotypical Victorian woman who prizes romantic love above all else. Patricia Stubbs provides a possible explanation for the trouble Undine has in relinquishing romantic ideas about love:

> One thing which made it very difficult for women to break through this family ideology was the seductive concept of romantic love, which

> became a key part of Victorian mythology once it was felt, in the wake of Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859), that Christianity could no longer offer a firm moral basis for human actions. In a world rocked by religious uncertainty a superior form of secular love could provide a new spiritual focus, and in a society under continual pressure from an embittered working class, human relationships could become a means of forgetting, of fending off despair. (1979, 8)

Stubbs's explanation has merit if one takes into consideration the religious uncertainty Undine experiences at the beginning of the novel. This, combined with the loneliness and isolation she feels due to her otherness and the fact that, as a woman, she is denied any possibility for fulfilment outside the domestic sphere, makes her susceptible to conventional romantic ideas regarding love. Perhaps if she had the prospect of a career in her future, this might have given her the sense of fulfilment which she believes a romantic relationship would. However, as society at the time restricted women firmly to the domestic sphere, such prospects are impossible for her. Undine subsequently turns to romantic love in the hopes of filling the void in her life that she herself gives expression to:

> Agony, anything, would be better than this dreadful coldness and indifference. Would it never end, never break? If only I could love something, she thought, as she passed slowly over the wet grass. To love something, to believe in something, to worship something, even if that something were only herself – to look at something with eyes other than those of calm indifference – it would be worth sleepless nights of tears and prayer. (49)

Undine thus finds in Albert what she has longed for all along: something to believe in and to worship. Here we find further similarities with *The Story of an African Farm.* Although the character of Lyndall shows a progression from that of Undine in the sense that she does not try to find fulfilment through personal relationships, as Undine does, she also struggles to escape the idea that fulfilment for a woman is achieved through commitment to something outside of herself. Her likeness to Undine in this regard is echoed in her words uttered at Otto's grave "I am so weary of myself! It is eating my

soul to its core – self, self, self! I cannot bear this life! I cannot breathe, I cannot live! Will nothing free me from myself? …I want to love! I want something great and pure to lift me to itself" (Schreiner [1883] 2008, 232). In the earlier novel, the role of service that a romantic relationship with Albert seems to offer Undine finally gives her life "something great and pure". However, in filling this role she regresses to the subservient feminine stereotype of her time. A possible explanation for Undine's attraction to Albert and the change she undergoes in his company may have to do with his assertive and domineering nature. On this point, Undine herself comments: "How nice it must be to have something you must obey, something you cannot help obeying, whether you wish or not!" (62) and "Why in this man's presence was she bowed down wishing only to do and say what he might approve?" (63). In this respect again, Undine reflects aspects of Schreiner's own personal history in which a similar attitude can be seen in comments like: "When I find a man as much stronger than I am as a child, then I will marry him" (Schoeman 1991, 58). The same sentiments are repeated in *The Story of an African Farm* by Lyndall who answers her lover's question "And you love me –?" (229) with: "Because you are strong. You are the first man I ever was afraid of" (229). Undine's attachment to Albert is in fact the clearest indication that ultimately, unlike Lyndall, she is unable to escape the gender expectation that women had to be obedient and subservient.

Albert's ideal of womanhood also deserves some attention, as it reflects the general opinion of the time on the subject. Because he represents the conventional attitude to gender in this way, Undine's relationship with him, and especially her desire to please him, is a significant indication of her own weakening resistance to these conventions. When she questions him on his opinion of what a woman should be, he answers:

> A woman to be womanly should have nothing striking or peculiar about her; she should shun all extremes in manners and modes of expression; she should have no strong views on any question, especially when they differ from those of her surroundings; she should not be too reserved in her manners, and still less too affable and undignified. There is between all extremes a happy mediate, and there a woman should always be found. Men may turn to one side or the other; woman never must. (67)

Albert's answer not only reveals the double standards with regard to men and women that Victorian society endorsed, but also the limits placed on women whose appearance and manners were valued over their intelligence. Very conventionally, Albert, seeks subservience and restraint in a woman, and because Undine does not meet these expectations, he remarks that she is "peculiar" (71) and her views and manners "unwomanly" (67). As Albert's opinions were widely subscribed to at the time, they are not very surprising. What is surprising is Undine's willingness to reform herself in order to meet these expectations. She wholeheartedly agrees with his instruction to her: "You must not spend so much time over your books as you have done. I would rather you left them alone altogether although you must give two or three hours a day to your music" (69). The extent to which she has regressed from her former assertive and sceptical self can be gauged by her own words of surprise at the effect that his presence has on her:

> [S]he had been born with strong and determined ideas on every subject, sub-and super-lunar, and not one step of her sixteen years' journey had she walked in the happy mediate road. It was too late to change now. They had told her that the day would come when she would repent having done nothing to try to conform herself, at least outwardly, to the views of others; and she did repent it as she sat there that evening. She would have parted with all that was highest and best in herself to become a little less Undine, a little more like anyone else. Who was this man, what was he, that he should make her grovel so? (67)

Undine's self-betrayal is evident in these words, and her idolisation of Albert will later be repeated in *The Story of an African Farm* through Em's relationship with Gregory

Rose, which contrasts so strikingly with Lyndall's uncompromising attitude that will never allow her to sacrifice herself in this manner for a man.

It seems possible that this aspect of Undine's characterisation which involves an unexpected conformity with conventional ideas of gender relations, might, once again, be a reflection of Schreiner's own youth and inexperience in dealing with such matters. When one notes the various parallels between Undine's love affair with Albert Blair and the real-life love affair between Schreiner and Julius Gau, whom she met when she was sixteen and a half, and in the care of the Robinsons in Dordrecht, the biographical aspect becomes even more striking. Further evidence that Undine's relationship with Albert is based on Schreiner's relationship with Gau is given by Schoeman, who refers to close parallels between scenes in the novel and incidents in her own life at this time, described in her correspondence years later with Havelock Ellis (Schoeman 1991, 237-238). It is also possible that Gau chastised Olive for her eccentricity, just as Albert chastises Undine for hers, and that he broke off the engagement when he realised that she would never make him the model wife he wanted in a woman (Schoeman 1991, 237).

The aftermath of Albert's break with Undine further highlights the extent to which she has begun to play the conventional part laid down for women, whose only prospect of any fulfilment is through their romantic relations with men. After the engagement is broken off, Undine is plunged into the kind of despair described earlier in this chapter as a feature of Victorian women suddenly deprived of their only reason for living: "I cannot help it – it is not cowardly – I am too tired – so tired. He does not want me anymore. There is nothing in the world, and I am so weary…" (84). In losing Albert, Undine experiences life as empty and meaningless – a reaction that is almost identical

to Aunt Margaret's response to losing Frank. Aunt Margaret suffers a mental breakdown while Undine experiences a despair so great that she loses all will to live, which is itself also a kind of mental breakdown. As already mentioned, it might be that Schreiner was trying to establish a pattern here, concerning the dark implications of gender roles. As with Aunt Margaret's madness, the trauma Undine experiences highlights the terrible effects of limiting women's opportunities for fulfilment. Because devotion to others was the definition of what it meant to be a woman, the loss of this role brought about a kind of identity crisis which is represented by Schreiner as a form of psychosis.

In addition to the relationship between Undine and Albert is the quite different one between her and Harry Blair, Albert's brother, who also expresses his love for her. Harry is not given much attention in the narrative and serves mainly as a foil to his brother; however, he is of interest as a piece of characterisation in which Olive Schreiner is also exploring gender subversion. In a way that parallels Undine's deviation from feminine roles, Harry subverts conventional masculine gender roles. His nature is effeminate and weak, an assessment echoed by Undine's remark about feeling "kindly contempt" (48) for his "blue-black woman's eyes and his soft voice" (48). The narrative emphasises his emotional and sensitive qualities, traditionally associated with women, while men were believed to be more rational and objective. Harry is hopelessly in love with Undine, although she feels nothing for him, establishing a dynamic which will be repeated, in a far more developed way, in the relationship between Gregory Rose and Lyndall in *The Story of an African Farm*. As will be shown later in this study, it is for the character of Gregory that Schreiner reserves her most radical subversion of masculine stereotypes, but that may interestingly be seen to have its beginnings here, in Harry Blair.

It is not Harry, however, but Albert who, regardless of his rejection of her, elicits from Undine the devotion that was seen as central to the woman's role by the gender conventions that she increasingly succumbs to. Although their break up means that she cannot express her devotion and service to Albert in the usual manner, through marriage, she finds another way to do so. Learning from his father, George, that his son has got himself into financial trouble, Undine agrees to marry George on the condition that he settle fifty pounds on her to do with as she wishes (86) – her aim being to give this sum of money to Albert. Undine is thus willing to sacrifice her own happiness in the service of her beloved and in this way finds the fulfilment of Victorian womanhood with its emphasis on self-sacrifice. More starkly here than anywhere else, Undine betrays her earlier scepticism about female roles, not only by the selfless devotion she shows, but also by marrying for financial motives, which was contrary to a deeply held feminist conviction of the day, as discussed in the previous chapter. The financial reasons behind Undine's agreeing to marry George Blair, although not for her own personal gain, show Undine acting in accordance with one of the foremost motivations for many Victorian marriages namely financial security. Schreiner wrote extensively on this subject in her long essay *Women and Labour* (1911) where she characterised marriages motivated by financial considerations rather than love as "parasitic" in nature and described the women within these marriages as "sex parasites". On this subject, she argues:

> … [A] curious tendency has manifested itself for the human female to become more or less parasitic; social conditions tend to rob her of all forms of active conscious social labour, and to reduce her, like the field bug, to the passive exercise of her sex-functions alone. (Schreiner [1911] 1998, 22)

Although *Women and Labour* was a much later work, one can glimpse the beginnings of many of its ideas in *Undine*, where, through her marriage to George Blair, Undine's

life becomes precisely that of a “sex-parasite”. Because all gainful employment at the time was carried out by the husband in most middle-class relationships, women like Undine became parasites, living off their partners. Despite the fact that many women were mothers and had the important responsibilities of raising children and managing homes, Schreiner makes the argument that even in this they had become redundant, as many of the domestic roles that women performed were being replaced by technological advances. Thus, Undine’s search for purpose, paradoxically, leads her further and further from her youthful rebellion against gender stereotypes, compromising her beliefs by entering into a loveless marriage where her only role is to serve as a trophy for her husband and to host and to attend social gatherings.

Although Undine is miserable in her role as wife to George Blair, she later finds happiness and fulfilment through the different role of devoted service, as a mother (Chapter Thirteen). Her baby becomes her sole consideration and, in this way, she yields to another conventional expectation of Victorian femininity. However, her happiness also blinds her to the fact that the baby is very sickly and, clinging desperately to this new-found role of service, she ignores the doctor’s warnings: “So sweet was that first draught of a new life that she had no eye to mark shadows, and did not notice, as all others did, that the life of the little child was growing weaker and fainter as the autumn days grew near” (99). Undine’s baby dies, shortly followed by the death of her husband, who leaves her his entire estate. Unexpectedly, perhaps, considering the direction in which her characterisation has been moving, ever deeper into gender orthodoxy, she renounces her husband’s wealth which she divides between his two sons, and resolves to return to South Africa, with only a few pounds and a chest of her belongings. Undine’s resolution to forgo this inherited wealth and instead to make an independent life for herself marks a critical turning point in the

novel. The decision seems to suggest a reassertion or rediscovery of her earlier unconventional, assertive, independent nature and her resolve not to compromise her sense of self for anyone.

However, Undine is not unaware of the difficulty of the task that she has set herself, for standing in her way is society's rigid conception of female gender roles which were designed specifically to limit women's opportunity for independence. This is made explicit in the narration:

> If she had been a man she might have thrown off her jacket and set to work instantly, carrying the endless iron buckets and coils of rope and wire with which the wagon beside which she stood was being laden. She might have made enough in half an hour to pay for a bed at one of the lower hotels, might have wandered about the town, seen something of life, and enjoyed herself in a manner. As it was, being only a woman and a fine little lady with the scent not yet out of her hair nor the softness rubbed from her hands, she stood there in the street, feeling very weak, bodily, after her illness, and mentally, after her long life of servitude and dependence – very weak and very heartsick. (117)

Despite feeling herself to be "only a woman" and "very weak", Undine shows great fortitude, and through this recovers something of her former unconventional self. She perseveres in her quest for self-sufficiency, despite her doubts at being "able to maintain herself without getting under someone's thumb" (117), and she is passionately determined to overcome the gender limitations imposed on her by society:

> Why should a woman not break free through conventional restraints that enervate her mind and dwarf her body, and enjoy a wild, free, true life, as a man may? – wander the green world over by the help of her hands and feet, and lead a free rough life in bondage to no man? – forget the old morbid loves and longings? – live and enjoy and learn as much as may before the silence comes? (117)

Undine's musings on the restraints placed on women are insightful as they testify to the multiple effects of these gender limitations which not only "enervate her mind" but also physically "dwarf her body". This inequality in the opportunities available to men

and women that Undine muses on manifests itself upon her arrival at the New Rush diamond fields, where ironically, she again becomes a victim of the very gender constrictions she is trying to escape. She is unable to find work that is not of a domestic nature since all that is available is ironing and needlework, occupations which were the epitome of femininity, and speak to the rigid separation of work spheres that existed for men and women at the time, as discussed in the Introduction. However, Undine is a victim not only of economic inequality, but also of the sexual double standards of her time. Inevitably, her decision to escape the restrictions placed on her as a woman is not admired by others but rather is treated with suspicion, and as a woman travelling on her own, she is looked down on. This is seen in Mr Snappercaps's exchange with his wife: "You don't know what sort of character she may be... If she's dressed up it does not say much for her that she's knocking about by herself and wants to go to the Fields. Is she married?" (119). It is seen as improper for women to go to the diamond fields alone, while men are at liberty to travel and do as they please without disapproval. These double standards are depicted earlier in the novel in the case of another single woman, Alice Brown, whose situation, though not identical with Undine's, allows Schreiner to further explore the realities of gender discrimination which both characters have to endure.

Alice Brown represents the Victorian type of the "fallen woman", who will recur in Schreiner's later novels: Lyndall in *The Story of an African Farm* and Bertie in *From Man to Man*. Both Alice Brown and Bertie are seduced by men and then abandoned, only to be scorned by society. Their transgressions speak to their desperate need to play the role of the devoted partner, in that they are willing to condemn themselves forever in the eyes of society in the hopes of gaining love. The way in which Alice reacts to the loss of her role as devoted partner when she is rejected also has parallels

with the way that, earlier in the novel, Undine and Aunt Margaret respond to their similar losses, in despair and breakdown. When Alice is abandoned by Albert, she is initially consoled by the fact that she at least has his baby to take care of, so that, in effect, one role of devoted service replaces another. Passing Alice, Undine remarks, "She had been very beautiful once … more beautiful than I. But the young was worn now and there were lines of suffering round the dark eyes and curved lips" (91). Alice's worn appearance can be attributed to the suffering she has experienced at the hands of Albert Blair. He pretends to care for her and she, believing his feelings to be sincere, begins a sexual relationship with him. When her baby dies, Alice shows the familiar pattern of women in the novel who are deprived of the only form of fulfilment that society allows them: in despair she runs away, not to be seen or heard from by anybody again.

Both Alice and Bertie (in *From Man to Man*) are testaments to Victorian society's hypocrisy regarding men and women's sexuality. Albeit discreetly, men were able to commit adultery or have sexual relations outside of marriage, while women were held to the highest moral standards. The seriousness with which women's chastity was regarded is commented on in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) by Mary Bennet, who moralises on her sister's decision to run off with Mr Wickham:

> Unhappy as the event must be for Lydia, we may draw from it this useful lesson: that loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable – that one false step involves her in endless ruin – that her reputation is no less brittle than it is beautiful, – and that she cannot be too much guarded in her behaviour towards the undeserving of the other sex. (Austen [1813] 2010, 278)

Although it is Albert who has acted badly by taking advantage of her blind love for him and then casting her aside while pregnant with his child once he had had enough of her, Alice is made to bear the consequences. As a "fallen" woman, her reputation is ruined and she is forced into a life of "poverty and shame" (94) and referred to as

"wicked" (92); while his reputation remains unscathed. Despite the cruel and unfeeling treatment that she has received at his hands, she remains devoted to him throughout, never once criticising his behaviour. Alice's unfailing worship of Albert is a testament to the deep-rooted belief that men belonged in a different category from women, and Alice, in accepting Albert's treatment of her, has clearly internalised this belief. The extent of the condemnation she faces is indicated by the criticism of her character by Nancy, her grandmother's maid: "Women that do that sort of thing she's been a-doing of, they never have no natural feeling." (97) Instead of being the result of a lack of natural feeling, their "indiscretions" are the result of women's desperation to fulfil the only role that society allows them, devotion to their partners. This view is supported by Rebekah in *From Man to Man* (1926) who in her conversation with John Ferdinand gives expression to Bertie's need to love and to dedicate herself to someone:

> It is an absorbing love she would love you with, John-Ferdinand; a love you probably cannot understand. You might become all the world to her. – Some women with complex, many-sided natures, if love fails them and one half of their nature dies, can still draw a kind of broken life through the other. The world of the impersonal is left them: they can still turn fiercely to it… But Bertie and such as Bertie have only one life possible, the life of the personal relations; if that fails them, all fails. (Schreiner [1926] 2015, 86)

In *Undine*, we have also found evidence of women whose only fulfilment is in personal relations and for them it certainly holds true that "if that fails them, all fails them". Precisely this has been seen in the portraits of Aunt Margaret and Undine herself, in her relationship with Albert Blair. However, Undine finally seems able to overcome her need for personal relationships and to find other outlets for her energies. Her break from the parasitism that characterised her marriage with George Blair and her decision to give up the wealth she had inherited and to support herself through her own hard

work challenges the idea that women were weak and dependent. The initial tenacity, courage and perseverance Undine shows in becoming self-sufficient speak to a strong-willed and autonomous nature, characteristics generally associated with men. However, despite her desire to free herself from the restraints placed on women, she initially experiences various difficulties in making enough money to sustain herself. This threatens to break her spirit and leads her to question the value of her efforts:

> It was a bright warm morning, but she was cold from hunger, and underneath the ground it must be so warm…. I will die…. Why should I go on like a fool, labouring and striving to keep a life that is worthless? I will lie still and die. (143)

Undine's faltering is not a sign of weakness but rather an understandable reaction to a life which denies women any place outside the home. She does not "lie still and die", however, but perseveres and eventually finds full-time work ironing. From this point, things begin to turn around for her as she finds herself, six months later, in possession of her own tent and enough clients to keep her ironing all day. Yet, for all her progress in making herself financially independent, Undine's self-fulfilment remains stunted by her inability to escape the Victorian conditioning that a woman's main priority in life is to live for and to serve others. This is witnessed in her relationship with one of her customers on the diamond fields who she nurses back to health. She says that the sight of Mr Brown with his "bonny light curls" (158) reminds her of someone she cared for long ago, and it is this reference to the past that seems to revive in her the old need to be of service to others which she has repeatedly succumbed to throughout the novel. It is not so much her decision to help Brown that sets back her progress towards independence, but rather the fact that caring for him becomes her sole consideration and priority. Everything that she does from now on, leading to the neglect of her own health, is in conformity to the feminine ideal of selfless devotion. Undine thus strives for independence but her conviction is yet again compromised, leaving the reader with

the impression that she will never in fact be able to escape the gender pressures of her age that bind women in self-sacrificing personal relations.

Despite Brown's dire physical state, Undine dedicates herself completely to his recovery. She even goes so far as "…to look for some Kaffir men to carry his tent next to [hers]; then [she] will be able to take care of him and iron too" (159). Gradually her dedication meets with success as her patient begins to recover, but this is accompanied by her own increasing loss of identity as she dedicates every waking moment to him. This is testified to in her reply to his expression of gratitude for all that she has done for him:

> Don't you know there are things we have to be more grateful for than being nursed and fed? You've given me something to take care of, and so, though you don't think it, you feel you have done more for me than I for you. (160)

Although Undine escapes the life of parasitism and dependence to which Victorian gender roles condemned women, and has achieved some autonomy, she is unable fully to overcome the pressure to sacrifice herself in service of others. It is this need, which first manifests itself in her relationship with Albert Blair, that is now reflected in her caring for Brown. The extent of her dedication to Mr Brown is further shown through her willingness to sell Aunt Margaret's ring in order to raise enough money to cover his medical bills and to send him back to England. Furthermore, she sends him the money for his voyage home anonymously, reasoning that "it should be burdened with no debt of gratitude" (162). This act of selflessness demonstrates how her existence has begun to revolve around his needs rather than her own. Undine sacrifices her health and all her finances in restoring Brown to health, but the extent of that sacrifice is most apparent in her willingness to forgo her own happiness by sending him back to England: "'It is all right. He is happy, very happy… He is happy, very happy' she

kept on repeating to herself when she got back to her tent" (165). These words are spoken in an attempt to console herself with the knowledge that she has given up the only thing that brings joy to her life. More importantly, with the loss of Brown as an object of selfless devotion, Undine loses all meaning and purpose as she did in the aftermath of her break from Albert Blair, for it is only through such relationships that she is allowed any form of fulfilment by the gender conventions of her society. Once again, her experience here brings to mind Rebekah's words in *From Man to Man:* "if the life of the personal fails her, all fails her". This seems to be exactly what happens, again, to Undine.

From this point, Undine's mental state only worsens, as she learns that her old love, Albert Blair, who has also been in New Rush, has recently died. Her grief on hearing this news, coupled with the burden of having given up Brown, makes her desperate in a way that recalls the breakdown of Aunt Margaret upon learning of her fiancé's death, as well as her own behaviour after her break with Albert Blair. Undine's uncertain state of mind here is reflected by her decision to find Albert Blair, and only worsens upon seeing his corpse:

> She took the sheet down off his face, and the cheek of the living woman was pressed close to the cold face of the dead man. In his ear she whispered the wild words of love that to the living she would never utter – wild passionate words, the outpourings of a life's crushed-out love, the breaking forth of a fiercely supressed passion. And the dead man lies so still; he does not send her from him; he does not silence her; he understands her now; he loves her now. She will see his face once more before it goes, and then she will creep close to him, and lie there, and never leave him. (171)

Her instability is also reflected in her contradictory emotions as she contemplates her own end, on the one hand recoiling from the prospect ("Not death, not death! …not death – anything else – death is too horrible" [175] but on the other, welcoming it with relief: "Death – only that, nothing more. What she had longed and prayed for; what

she had looked for in the muddy pool; what she had sighed for in days of emptiness – it had come at last" (175). In essence, her feelings of emptiness are the result of no longer having someone or something which might fulfil her life. Despite the fact that the ending of the novel seems to support the conventional notion that it is only through a romantic relationship that a woman can find happiness, *Undine* does not end in a marriage which miraculously resolves all its tensions. Instead it points out the harmful implications of social conventions which limit the forms of women's fulfilment. Rather than marry her hero, Undine dies alone. Although she has achieved financial freedom, the novel makes it clear that society's gender conditioning of women is not something that is easily overcome. The penultimate sentence of *Undine* is enlightening in this respect: "Her white *kappie* lay near her and cast a grotesque shadow, like a man's face with a long nose and chin; and the light glistened on her soft brown hair" (177). The fact that the shadow resembles the face of a man seems to suggest that Undine's death is caused by men or, more accurately, by a patriarchal society's prescription to women that only through service can they find happiness, and it is this which seems to have cast a shadow over her life and prevented her from living a life of self-fulfilling independence.

That at the time of writing *Undine* Schreiner was still very young and her thinking about gender still only half-formed can perhaps be seen in Undine's own uncertainty and vacillation in response to social conventions: putting up a half-hearted rebellion in which acts of subversion alternate with her regressions into conformity. Nevertheless, as Ruth-Parkin Gounelas points out, in *Undine* "… [Schreiner] had found her subject: social structures of femininity and the price paid by individual women, particularly those who begin as 'queer little girls', in resisting or submitting to them" (Ruth Parkin-Gounelas 1991, 86). Undine demonstrates the difficulties women had in escaping

social expectations of feminine self-sacrifice, as well as the strain that gender roles placed on women's emotional and mental states. In her, Schreiner presents a figure that both resists and submits to these social structures. In her next novel, in which she would address the same issues, she chose a somewhat different approach that avoided this experience of self-division within a single character, by turning the two impulses – of resistance and submission – into two fully realised characters, Lyndall and Em. This narrative strategy had its own rewards, which will be explored in the following chapter – yet in separating the two impulses in this manner, Schreiner lost something of the vision in *Undine* of the tension and conflict that individual women in her time experienced in response to society's expectations of them. Although Undine's subversion of female gender roles of the time is inconsistent and marked by lapses into conventional behaviour, she represents a crucial stage in the process by which Schreiner moved towards her more mature and radical heroine in *The Story of an African Farm*. In Lyndall, she would portray a woman more consistently resolved to live her life on her own terms, in sustained defiance of the gender roles – of feminine submissiveness and devoted service – that Undine constantly finds herself relapsing into. Yet, as will shortly be shown, even Lyndall, who does not seek fulfilment, through personal relationships, like Undine, craves some alternative way in which she too can dedicate her life, in a higher form of self-sacrifice – and this might suggest that Schreiner herself was never completely liberated from the ideal of female fulfilment in devoted service. On this point Caroline Burdett explains that "[t]he bourgeois ideal of female selfhood-through-love cannot be achieved (of course), but nor can it be cast off; instead it becomes pathological. In gracelessly raw form, Undine offers a vision of sexual relations *and* identities as diseased. It suggests too, that the social condition of women will not fundamentally improve unless sexual natures – women's, and

especially men's are reformed" (2001, 16). In *Undine*, Schreiner begins her attempts to subvert conventional gender identities made available to women, through the portrait of a woman who is partially "reformed", but in her next novel a bolder attempt will be made at imagining a more complete reformation, not only of women's, but men's natures.

Chapter 2

Female Gender Subversion in *The Story of an African Farm*

In *The Story of an African Farm*, Schreiner explores the limited roles available to women and illustrates the effects of failing to conform to these roles. In addition to this, she demonstrates that any search for alternative roles, aside from those of wife and mother, are ultimately destined to fail, due to the rigid gender constrictions of the time. Schreiner communicates this central message through her two juxtaposed characters, the cousins Lyndall and Em. Through Em, Schreiner explores conventional Victorian women's roles, and through Lyndall, possible alternatives to these roles. In these two characters, she uses a technique of paired opposites, which in the novel *Undine,* she had combined in a single character. The two girls' differing natures are firmly established at the start of the novel: Lyndall is rebellious and strong-willed, while Em is conventional and docile, so that each character serves as a foil for the other. Thus, Lyndall's extreme subversiveness is made more apparent when compared to Em's conventionality and vice versa. Schreiner's decision in this novel to split the two sides of Undine's nature into two different characters gave her the opportunity to explore in greater depth the contrasting psychologies, and to illustrate the inner conflicts each experiences in her search for fulfilment, either in abiding by, or rebelling against, Victorian society's prescribed roles for women. Importantly however, despite their radically differing natures, Lyndall and Em are linked by a shared inability, ultimately, to free themselves from the Victorian idea that for women, regardless of their ambitions, fulfilment was attainable only through some form of self-sacrificing service.

During the Victorian period, the critic Jane Rendall has pointed out,

> [t]he starting point for women lay in the assumption that their lives and their future had to be seen in the context of their family roles. For them, in reality, there was no future outside the confines either of the family into which they were born or the one which they might themselves create, or, in default of either, the household which they might serve, as a servant or governess. (1990, 4)

It was in order to ensure the continuance of women's relegation to the domestic sphere that they were denied the opportunity to support themselves, and thus kept dependent on men. However, Lyndall rebels against these gender conventions by rejecting roles where she is robbed of any power. Her rebellion is first witnessed when, as a child, she expresses her yearning for autonomy, and later when she actively tries to achieve this by searching for an alternative role for herself, which would allow her to escape conventional roles of dependence. The child Lyndall's defiance is seen in her dreams of achieving independence by escaping the farm and attaining great wealth: "When I am grown up, I shall be rich, very rich…" (15, 2008; all subsequent references will be to this edition). Her response to Em's offer to one-day give her some of her sheep is: "I do not want your sheep, I want things of my own" (15). Her subversiveness is further demonstrated in her words to Em: "When you are seventeen this Boer-woman will go; you will have this farm and everything that is upon it for your own; but I… will have nothing. I must learn" (15). Lyndall's desire for learning is rooted in her belief that it will enable her to lead an independent life, going against conventional expectations that "[w]omen should rather be encouraged to develop their own best qualities, those of the heart and moral feelings…" (Rendall 1990, 20). Her defiant nature is given further emphasis through her impassioned admiration of Napoleon. Quite apart from the particular associations of this historical figure, it is significant that Lyndall should take a *man* as her role model, indicating her strong identification with the kind of influence and power men represented, and women at the time lacked. Her admiration of fiercely

masculine qualities such as dominance and control instead of compliance and submission emphasises her rejection of the feminine norm. Yet, it is also possible that in the choice of Napoleon as an icon of masculinity, with all his deeply ambiguous moral associations, Schreiner may have been making subtle hints about the problems and dangers of the male quest for power.

Despite the fact that Lyndall nurtures what would have been considered distinctly masculine aspirations, she is, even at her young age, aware of the possibilities of women's power, consisting of their "feminine allure" (Burdett 2001, 33), stating that when she is older "…I shall wear not only for best, but every day, a pure white silk, and little rose-buds, like the lady in Tant Sannie's bedroom, and my petticoats will be embroidered, not only at the bottom, but all through" (15). However, it is only later, when she attends boarding school, that she discovers this is the sole means through which women can experience any measure of influence or authority, and as such, no substitute for the possibilities open to men, which she longs for. Her straying from what was regarded as the norm for girls is emphasised through the difference between her aspirations and those of her cousin. Em does not hanker after independence or power, nor does she express any dissatisfaction with her narrowly restricted circumstances. Instead, she has internalised the Victorian gender prescription that for women the only possible option for achieving fulfilment was marriage. Her conventionality, which can conceive of no future opportunities outside marriage, is seen in her reply to Lyndall's expressed intention of one-day leaving the farm: "I suppose some day we shall go somewhere; but now we are only twelve, and we cannot marry till we are seventeen" (14).

The young Lyndall's determination to escape the constraints of her gender is repeatedly demonstrated through her defiance of Tant Sannie and Bonaparte Blenkins's authority. This stands in direct opposition to conventional ideas of the time that "[m]eekness, gentleness, temperance… [and] command over the passions which is obtained by frequent self-denial… are considered as female virtues" (Rendall 1990, 77). When Tant Sannie and Blenkins chase Otto from the farm (63), Lyndall does not protest or try to intervene. However, rather than indicating a weakness, her inaction here shows her strength and stoicism as she bears her distress silently, refusing to give anyone the satisfaction of knowing they can hurt her and therefore have power over her. Em's response is the opposite of Lyndall's, displaying through her emotional reaction as she "wailed bitterly" (65) exactly what was expected of women. Lyndall despises such "womanly" feelings, and upon hearing Em crying, rebukes her: "I wish you would be quiet... Does it give you such felicity to let Bonaparte know he is hurting you?" (65). Subsequently, when Lyndall and Em are locked inside their room (65), Lyndall shows her resistance by attempting to burn down the window, knowing full well that she could be setting the whole house on fire. Although her effort to escape fails, it shows her resoluteness and the lengths to which she will go in order to escape her position of powerlessness. It is also possible, in this early scene of almost suicidal recklessness, that Schreiner is hinting at the darker aspects of Lyndall's psychology which will emerge more clearly later, when the constraints placed upon her, and the need to escape them, produce a condition that verges on madness (66). Another childhood scene of injustice takes place when Blenkins falsely accuses Waldo of having eaten Tant Sannie's peaches, which gives him an excuse to whip the boy. After the whipping, Em again cries in distress; but Lyndall on this occasion shows her defiance openly by visiting the room where Waldo has been locked up. The

unexpectedness of this show of courage by a young girl is testified to by Tant Sannie and Bonaparte's reaction: they are so unsettled by her boldness that they make no attempt to stop her. Her fierce indignation and determination to challenge and to overcome her oppressors is made clear by her words, "[w]e will not be children always; we shall have the power too, some day" (105). However, her courageous and assertive nature is even more apparent when she refuses Blenkins's tutelage. Convinced of his ignorance, Lyndall questions him on the signs of the Zodiac and Copernicus and when his answers confirm her suspicions, she stops attending his classes. Em reports to Waldo "... she just put her books under her arm and walked out; and she will never come to his school again, she says, and she *always* does what she says" (49), demonstrating once again how far removed Lyndall is from the norms of feminine submissiveness.

After Lyndall's confrontation with Blenkins, she is sent to boarding school. She later tells Waldo of the patience needed in getting Tant Sannie to concede to her request, highlighting her rational and calculating nature:

> Long years ago I resolved to be sent to school. It seemed a thing utterly out of my power; but I waited, I watched, I collected clothes, I wrote, took my place at the school; when all was ready I bore with my full force on the Boer-woman, and she sent me at last. It was a small thing; but life is made up of small things…. What has been done in small things can be done in large. Shall be. (205)

Lyndall's final statement shows her feeling of victory and makes her hopeful that she will achieve the independence she yearns for. However, this hope is short-lived. Upon her return from school, we learn that her experience had not been what she hoped for. Her aspiration of "… know[ing] everything that a human being can" (168) is not realised. She tells Waldo that the education she received was narrow, insipid and useless, and therefore she rejected it: "I did not learn music, because I had no natural

talent; and when the drove made cushions, and hideous flowers that roses laugh at, and a footstool in six weeks that a machine would have made better in five minutes, I went to my room" (169-170). Lyndall is not content to spend her time occupied with what she regards as mind-numbing and pointless domestic tasks. She has a keen intelligence, as is revealed through her meditation on various subjects, and her views on religion in particular might easily be mistaken for those of Undine, in their unorthodox nature:

> It must be very nice to believe in the Devil… I wish I did. If it would be of any use I would pray three hours night and morning on my bare knees, 'God, let me believe in Satan.' He is so useful to those people who do. They may be as selfish and as sensual as they please and, between God's will and the Devil's action, always have someone to throw their sin on. (197)

As is the case with Undine, it is not only the nature of Lyndall's opinions that make her seem subversive, but the fact that she has any opinions in the first place and expresses them with such conviction, because this subverts the commonly held belief that women are incapable of critical thinking. Even more than Undine, however, Lyndall clearly shows a daring and independent intelligence that ranges not only over religion and literature, but also the limitations of women's lives and the need for reform. Yet her desire to learn and her aptitude for cogent, critical thinking is frustrated by her society which for the most part does not allow women roles outside the domestic sphere and it is exactly for this that the boarding school tries to prepare Lyndall. On the education available to women, Jane Rendall explains that "[s]chools, when well administered, could similarly offer truly religious principles and an education which could fit girls not only for their maternal role, but as future governesses or teachers" (1990, 114). In the novel, it is precisely this regime that is reflected in Lyndall's account

to Waldo of her schooling: “Yes; I have learned something, though hardly what I expected, and not *quite* so much” (169). Commenting on the purpose of “finishing” schools for girls, she elucidates:

> They finish everything but imbecility and weakness, and that they cultivate. They are nicely adapted machines for experimenting on the question, ‘Into how little space a human soul can be crushed?’ I have seen some souls so compressed that they would have fitted into a small thimble, and found room to move there – wide room. A woman who has been for many years at one of those places carries the mark of the beast on her till she dies, though she may expand a little afterwards, when she breaths in the free world. (169)

The kind of instruction that Lyndall has received is a product of the belief that women’s natures fundamentally differed from those of men, a difference attributed to biology. However, she goes on to discredit the idea that gender is determined by biology, and in this anticipates one of the foundational ideas of Gender Theory which would emerge a century later in the works of figures such as Judith Butler. In common with these writers, Lyndall believes that the gender characteristics assigned to women in her day, such as restraint, subservience and selflessness, are not inherent to their natures, but rather that society teaches women, from a young age, to exemplify these traits. Her words “crushed”, “compressed” and “fitted” highlight the artificial and constructed nature of female gender roles. Lyndall goes on to explain to Waldo that the worst part is, having been so relentlessly exposed to the view that they are inferior to men, women eventually begin to internalise their subordinate position and to accept it as natural. “Then the curse begins to act on us”, she says. “It finishes its work when we are grown women, who no more look wistfully at a healthy life; we are contented. We fit our sphere as a Chinese woman’s foot fits her shoe, exactly, as though God had made both – and yet He knows nothing of either” (173). Lyndall convincingly describes how girls are conditioned from a young age to conduct themselves in a specific manner

different to that of boys, and in this way, she demonstrates the constructed nature of gender:

> They begin to shape us to our cursed end… when we are tiny things in shoes and socks. We sit with our little feet drawn up under us in the window, and look out at the boys in their happy play. We want to go. Then a loving hand is laid on us: 'Little one, you cannot go… your face will burn, and your nice white dress be spoiled.' We feel it must be for our good, it is so lovingly said; but we cannot understand; and we kneel still with one little cheek wistfully pressed against the pane. Afterwards we go and thread blue beads…. (172-173)

Lyndall's monologue on the difference between the upbringing of girls and boys, as well as her more general views regarding the injustice endured by women, is likely born out of Schreiner's own experiences as a child. Later in life, she wrote to her friend Adela de Villiers:

> You know when I was a young girl and a child I felt this awful bitterness in my soul because I was woman, because there were women in the world. I felt [like] the wonderful Kaffir woman, who once was talking to me and said, 'There may be a God, I do not say there is not; but if there is he is not good – why did he make woman?' (Parkin-Gounelas 1991, 85)

As a result of Lyndall's disillusionment with the education offered at her boarding school, she refuses to submit to their tutelage. Instead she takes the task of her education upon herself, demonstrating again her deviance from the expectation that women be meek and subservient:

> With the money saved from such work I bought books and newspapers, and at night I sat up. I read, and epitomised what I read; and I found time to write some plays, and find out how hard it is to make your thoughts look anything but imbecile fools when you paint them with ink on paper. In the holidays I learned a great deal more. I made acquaintances, saw a few places, and many people, and some different ways of living, which is more than any books can show one. On the whole, I am not dissatisfied with my four years. I have not learned what I expected; but I have learned something else. (170)

Lyndall's desire for independence drives her to want to attend school in the hopes that through education she would be able to find an alternative role for herself to that of

wife. However, her dreams of fulfilling higher ambitions than the conventional ones of nurse and governess prove impossible, as the only education open to women merely prepares them for exactly these conventional roles. Gail Cunningham argues that Lyndall's inability to find useful occupation outside traditional forms is not through a lack of will but rather due to the rigid gender roles of her time:

> [t]he dedicated career-woman could not appear in fiction until careers were opened for her to pursue; all that we can look for in earlier fiction as a comparison to the New Woman's desire for independence and self-fulfilment is the comparatively rare treatment of the intelligent woman seeking useful occupation. (1978, 37)

However, it is important to see that Lyndall's prioritising of "useful occupation" is the result not only of a craving for personal independence, but also of an idealism that compels dedication to some greater cause. As will be discussed in more detail below, the traditional ideal of service can be seen as implicit even in her more liberated view of gender identity. In seeking a career outside the sphere traditionally reserved for her gender – the home and its selfless devotion to others – Lyndall does not in fact free herself from the conventional assumption that service is an inherent part of a women's gender identity, but simply exchanges one form of service, in the domestic relationship, for another.

Lyndall's deviation from conventional feminine gender roles is further emphasised through her physical strength, as for example witnessed in her masterly handling of the horses in Chapter Eighteen. Gregory describes how, "…[s]he held the horses as if they were made of iron" (193), and when he offers to help her she responds, "No, thank you; I can manage them myself. I've got a pair of bits that would break their jaws if I used them well" (193). Lyndall's physical strength seems even more incongruous when one takes into account that in appearance she is the epitome of femininity. She is described as having an "elphin-like beauty" (4) and as "more like a princess… than

the lady who still hung on the wall" (166) in reference to a picture in Tant Sannie's bedroom. Gregory writes to his sister that "she has got the littlest hands I ever saw" (193), and elsewhere she is described as having "dainty little arms" (171). That Lyndall's show of strength goes against the norm of femininity highlighted in these references is supported by Gregory's description of her, after witnessing the spectacle with the horses, as "unwomanly" (193). This judgment of Lyndall reflects the belief that women were, naturally, the "weaker sex", which was used to support the idea that it was equally natural for them to be governed by men. On this point Gregory asserts:

> I don't believe in a man who can't make a woman obey him. Now Em, - I'm very fond of her, as you know – but if I tell her to put on a certain dress she puts it on; and if I tell her to sit on a certain seat, on that seat she sits; and if I tell her not to speak to a certain individual she does not speak to them. If a man lets a woman do what he doesn't like, he's a muff. (194)

Gregory's remarks about Em touch on another aspect of Lyndall's subversion of gender roles, namely her attitude to romantic love and marriage, which defy convention. Once again, her unorthodox views are highlighted by means of the contrast with those around her. Traditional Victorian ideas are held by Tant Sannie, who expresses the opinion that marriage and motherhood are the finest things in the world and divinely ordained:

> If the beloved Redeemer didn't mean men to have wives, what did He make women for? That's what I say. If a woman's old enough to marry, and she doesn't, she is sinning against the Lord – it's wanting to know better than Him. What, does she think the Lord took all that trouble in making her for nothing? It's evident He wants babies, otherwise why does He send them? (291)

Tant Sannie's words to Em not only illustrate the narrowness of women's lives but also what Carolyn Joyce Berkman refers to as the "… insidious, symbiotic alliance between patriarchal norms and Christianity" (1989, 126). Like Tant Sannie, Em views marriage

as the highest ideal for women and, in line with conventional thought, she regards love as synonymous with service, a view illustrated in her relationship with Gregory Rose. When he declares his love for her, she answers: "I will do everything you tell me" (162). Commenting on her reply, the narrator asks, "What else could she say? Her idea of love was only service" (162). Later on, Lyndall fittingly compares Em to the accompaniment of a song: "She fills up the gaps in other people's lives, and is always number two…" (221). The idea that Em associates fulfilment with self-sacrificing service is further stressed through her revelling in the thought of carrying out mundane domestic tasks for Gregory once they are married: "Every day when [he] came home, tired from his work, he would look about and say, 'Where is my wife? Has no one seen my wife? Wife, some coffee!' and she would give him some" (165). The sincerity of Em's declaration, "I will do everything you tell me", is quickly proven: Gregory instructs Em to love him more than she loves anybody else (160) and although she doubts whether she can fulfil his wishes, her answer – "…I will try not to love anyone else. But I do not know if I will be able" (163) – reflects her complete dedication to him. In line with the conventions of the time, she regards her inability to make him her sole consideration as a flaw in her performance of the woman's roles: "'I do not know how it is,' she said humbly, nestling to him, 'but I cannot love you so much as you love me. Perhaps it is because I am only a woman; but I *do* love you as much I can'" (163). Em subscribes to the conventional belief that romantic love will completely fulfil her, as illustrated by her ruminating on Gregory's love for her:

> Now one said, 'I love you better than all the world.' One loved her better than she loved him. How suddenly rich she was. She kept clasping and unclasping her hands. So a beggar feels who falls asleep on the pavement wet and hungry, and who wakes in a palace hall with servants and lights and a feast before him. (161)

The metaphor Em uses in comparing herself to a beggar who has suddenly been made rich clearly shows her exulted view of love. In this, she resembles Undine who similarly attempts to find fulfilment through love. Later on, when Em and Gregory are engaged, the utter joy she experiences at the prospect of marrying him is testified to by her tender, rapturous, handling of the contents of her trousseau as the embodiment of that marriage: “she turned them all over as though she saw them for the first time, packed them all out, and packed them all in, without one fold or crumple; and then sat down and looked at them” (165).

Another aspect of Em’s conventional nature is her belief in women’s inferiority, which is reflected in her groundless admiration of Gregory: “…no one is worthy of his love. I am not. It is so great and pure” (167); and she also accepts sexist statements from him that “…no women *can* love as a man can” (161). Despite Em’s fierce belief in Gregory’s love as superior to her own, he is the one who proves to be fickle. Her reluctance to see this and other faults, and her tendency to blame herself, conform to the nineteenth century gender conditioning that women were inferior to men as well as the belief that they had to put others’ needs before their own. Em’s guilt at not always adhering to this last point is indicated by her confession to Waldo: “I wish I could have been a little child always. You are so good then. You are never selfish; you like everyone to have everything; but when you are grown up there are some things you like to have all to yourself, you don’t like anyone else to have any of them” (208). Em’s feelings of guilt, that she is not good enough or that her love is somehow inferior, illustrate the harmful effects of a too narrow formulation of womanhood, as she is constantly made to feel that she is erring when she does not give priority to others’ needs. Ironically, however, despite her feelings of selfishness, she is perhaps the novel’s most selfless character. The most striking instance of this is when she breaks

off the engagement between herself and Gregory. Her decision does not arise from a feeling of betrayal due to his blatant courting of her cousin, but out of consideration for his happiness, which she believes more likely to be achieved with Lyndall than with herself. After Lyndall leaves the farm (Chapter Twenty-two), and Gregory grows distant and cold towards Em, she suppresses her hurt feelings and instead focusses entirely on his needs: “Of late Gregory had grown strangely impervious to the sounds and sights about him. His lease had run out, but Em had said, ‘Do not renew it; I need one to help me; just stay on’” (236). She is equally altruistic when she suggests: “You must not remain in your own little house; live with me; you can look after my ostriches better so” (236). In addition to this, she finds domestic tasks for him to do in the hopes that they will take his mind off his unhappy situation.

Yet, for all Em’s conventionality, it seems that, like Lyndall, she also experiences a kind of entrapment in her gender role. In putting her own needs second, as women were brought up to do at the time, she makes herself unhappy; but when she neglects to do this she is plagued by guilt (208). In contrast to Lyndall, she never directly expresses any dissatisfaction with her lot, but nevertheless, something similar to Lyndall’s mood seems to reveal itself in unexpected details like the melancholy song Em sings: “And take me away, / And take me away, / And take me away, / To the Blue Water –” (235). The refrain of “take me away” might express a personal yearning to escape the restrictions of her gender and the unhappiness which results from prioritising others’ needs.

Although in many ways Em seems to parallel the conventionality displayed by Undine in her personal relations, but there are in fact significant differences between the characters. Unlike the case of Undine, discussed in in the previous chapter, where the

loss of her lover produces despair and breakdown, Em does not collapse when her relationship with Gregory fails, even though she has invested all her happiness in it. Instead, she carries on, occupying her time with domestic tasks. This might suggest a greater complexity in her characterisation than is at first apparent to the reader: more self-contained and autonomous and able to survive her abandonment by the figure who supposedly is the foundation of her existence. At the end of the novel when Gregory proposes to her a second time, her response is quite different from the naïve sentimentality of her previous courtship, and much more like the unillusioned realism and self-awareness we associate with Lyndall. Commenting on her upcoming marriage, she says to Waldo:

> Why is it always so, Waldo, always so?... We long for things, and long for them, and pray for them; we would give all we have to come near to them, but we never reach them. Then at last, too late, when we don't want them any more, when all the sweetness is taken out of them, then they come. We don't want them then. (295)

Yet despite the fact that Em does not look forward to marrying Gregory, it never seems to occur to her to reject his proposal. Although we are not given further insights into her feelings on the subject, it is possible that she has internalised Victorian gender conventions to such an extent that thoughts about her happiness do not occur to her. Thus, her decision could reflect the extent to which she has been conditioned to believe that marriage is the natural course for women, that she is willing to marry someone who does not love her rather than resign herself to a fate of spinsterhood. Em's decision might seem bewildering to a modern reader, but considering society's denigration of spinsterhood and the lack of alternative roles for women, one is able to sympathise with her position. On the position of unmarried women, Lyndall insightfully comments:

> Let any man think for five minutes of what old maidenhood means to a woman – and then let him be silent. Is it easy to bear through life a name

> that in itself signifies defeat? To dwell, as nine out of ten unmarried women must, under the finger of another woman? Is it easy to look forward to an old age without honour, without the reward of useful labour, without love? I wonder how many men there are who would give up everything that is dear in life for the sake of maintaining a high ideal purity? (178-179)

Yet, although Em seems to submit to the conventions of marriage for herself, she does seem to have become more liberated in her general views on the subject, telling Tant Sannie: “Perhaps it might not suit all people, at all times, as well as it suits you….” (391). By the end of the novel, she has developed a flexibility regarding social conventions that completely eludes Undine and Aunt Margaret in the earlier novel. To a degree, Em’s story, though less dramatic than Lyndall’s, can also be seen as an aspect of Schreiner’s gender subversion. Although she marries at the end, it seems to be entirely without the conventional illusions of happiness and fulfilment, but rather it highlights the limited opportunities available to women, as well as the social pressure to marry that they are subjected to. Although Em is, in many ways, clearly the antithesis of Lyndall and serves to highlight Lyndall’s subversiveness, she is also a thoughtfully developed character who has a significant part to play in the novel’s depiction of gender roles. Her unexpectedly complex, changing conduct and feelings give us additional insights into the subject. In Em’s story, we recognise an aspect of Schreiner’s art, in which, as Cherry Clayton’s claims “[i]nternal elements comment on one another without losing their separate identity and validity” (1983, 22). In her relationship to Lyndall, we see Schreiner’s development from *Undine*, in which Aunt Margaret serves much the same contrastive function as Em. However, the earlier character comes across as more of a stereotype who does not engage the reader’s sympathies with her circumstances in the same way that Em does. Finally, although Schreiner, the outspoken champion of various feminist causes, probably identified

more with Lyndall than with Em, it is possible that, in part, Em too was the projection of an aspect of the author, which clung to the belief in the priority, for women, of self-sacrificing personal relationships. In an entry in Schreiner's private journal, she recorded: "Ever since I could remember, If I loved a person really, … then I had no self, they were everything to me" (Horton 1995, 88). Unlike Em, on the other hand, Lyndall never attaches any importance to marriage nor does she share Em's exalted view of love. She is aware that romantic relationships require women to be subservient to men and asserts her views on this issue: "I am not in so great a hurry to put my neck beneath any man's foot …" (167). Lyndall tries to escape the roles of her time by redefining romantic relationships between men and women. However, her attempts at reforming women's role within relationships, as with her attempts at finding useful occupation, are doomed to failure and lead to feelings of disappointment and frustration. This is seen in her relationship with her lover. Conventional Victorian romantic relationships required complete submission from women, already witnessed in Em's relationship with Gregory Rose. However, Lyndall subverts such ideas about the dynamic of romantic relationships and insists on a relationship based on equality. Her firmness and resolve on this last point is seen in her refusal of her lover's marriage proposal, as this would mean relinquishing her independence: "because if once you have me you would hold me fast. I shall never be free again" (227). An additional problem is the limited and superficial nature of her lover's affections as he admits to her: "I love you. I do not pretend that it is in any high, superhuman sense; I do not say that I should like you as well if you were ugly and deformed …." (228). Although his words might come across as improbably blunt and unfeeling, he is only verbalising the values of his time wherein beauty in women was prized above all else. Lyndall complains about these distorted values to Waldo, at the same time as emphasising

how in response, women have learned to manipulate them: “Mark you … we always have this advantage over you – we can at any time step into ease and competence, where you must labour patiently for it. A little weeping, a little wheedling, a little self-degradation, a little careful use of our advantages, and then some man will say: ‘Come, be my wife!’ With good looks and youth marriage is easy to attain” (174). An arrogant shallowness on the one side, and a cynical subservience on the other seem, for Lyndall, to constitute the conventional relationships that she so passionately rejects.

For all Lyndall’s ability to identify the shortcomings of a value system that requires subservience from women, it is not always easy for her to escape it. This is witnessed in her attraction to her lover. His need to control her inevitably alienates her from him, but paradoxically it is also what attracts her to him. She admits to him that she loves him, “[b]ecause you are strong. You are the first man I ever was afraid of. And… because I like to experience, I like to try. You don’t understand that” (229). Lyndall’s words illustrate her difficulty in completely casting off the values of her time and perhaps prove that despite her strong view on equality between the sexes, she struggles fully to escape the assumption that women should be dominated by men. As in the earlier case of Undine and Albert, discussed in the previous chapter, Lyndall’s lover is the only man she has met whose will is as strong as her own and to whom she finds herself wanting to submit. However, unlike Undine, she finds the strength to resist her lover’s dominant nature. She is the one who sets the terms of their relationship, all of which he happily consents to in order to be close to her (Chapter Twenty-two). By juxtaposing Undine and Lyndall in this way one can see the development that has taken place in Schreiner’s conception of her heroines. In Lyndall, she has created a woman who defies the conventional role of subservience and instead of her giving in to her lover’s every demand, *she* makes the demands. Her status within the

relationship as more than an equal is illustrated by the way she controls every situation: “She lifted her face that he might kiss it, and when he had kissed it once, she still held it that he might kiss it again” (231).

Yet for all Schreiner’s ability to imagine radically different dynamics in the relationships between men and women, there were limits to what even she, at this youthful stage of her career, was able to picture particularly in regard to the topic of sex, the most entrenched of all Victorian taboos. Lyndall’s pregnancy is never properly explained apart from a vague reference to an encounter at night in some avenue (231). In this respect there was little artistic progression from her earlier novel’s depiction of the relationship between Undine and Albert Blair which is equally devoid of passion. The behaviour of Lyndall’s lover seems more that of a father than a lover:

> He lifted her gently up and sat her on his knee. ‘Poor little thing,’ he said. She turned her face to his shoulder and buried it against his neck; he wound his strong arm about her and held her close to him. When she had sat for a long while, he drew with his hand the face down and held it against his arm. He kissed it and then put it back in its old resting place. (231)

Lyndall does seem to wield considerable power in the relationship, but she is fully aware that this leverage simply derives from her refusal to marry and that once they are married, she would be completely under his control. It is this inequality, which she sees as inherent and unavoidable in marriage, that prevents her from committing herself to anyone. She goes on to explain to her lover that she cannot marry him: “Because, if I had been married to you for a year, I should have come to my senses, and seen that your hands and your voice are like the hands and the voice of any other man. I cannot quite see that now. But it is all madness. You call into activity one part of my nature; there is a higher part that you know nothing of, that you never touch” (227). This “higher part” part of herself which she refers to may be understood as the

intellectual level on which, she believes, couples should connect. Central to her unorthodox view, therefore, is the assumption that authentic love can only exist between intellectual equals. This of course contradicts the common belief at the time, not only that women are intellectually inferior, but that their ignorance is in fact to be cherished, as carrying with it an innocence needed in domestic life to counteract the immorality of the public sphere, as well as to curb any licentious inclinations of their husbands. Thus, it was believed that equality between the sexes would make women unattractive to men, and destroy any prospect of a harmonious domestic life. However, Lyndall challenges these ideas: she speaks out about the destructive implications for love and the relationships between the sexes which arise from the enforced ignorance of women. On this point, she states that bringing women up to be the intellectual inferiors of men will always produce a love inferior to that between intellectual equals: "A great soul draws and is drawn with a more fierce intensity than any small one. By every inch we grow in intellectual height our love strikes down its roots deeper, and spreads out its arms wider. It is for love's sake yet more than for any other that we look for that new time" (180). Lyndall thus redefines conventional notions of love in terms of companionship rather than of subservience. We see Lyndall's new conception of love echoed in Schreiner's later essay *Women and Labour* (1911), where she argues: "… the woman's movement might not less justly be called a part of a great movement of the sexes towards each other, a movement towards common occupations, common interests, common ideals, and an emotional tenderness and sympathy between the sexes more deeply founded and more indestructible `than any the world has yet seen" (1998, 106).

The validity of these ideas on love is testified to by the failure of all Schreiner's fictive relationships that are not based on equality. In this connection, Richard Rive comments on the ways Schreiner's depiction of marriage adhere to a specific pattern:

> All her main characters either do not marry or are prevented from marrying or are unhappily married. Undine, Waldo, and Lyndall do not marry and have unhappy, unrealised love affairs. Aunt Margaret and the governess [in *Undine*] and Bertie [in *From Man to Man*] are prevented from getting married through tragic circumstances. Rebekah, Drummond, and Em marry unhappily and are forced to live with people who cannot return their affection or for whom they have no affection. (1972, 241)

There is, however, one relationship in Schreiner's fiction which seems to have the potential to develop along quite different lines. To Waldo, Lyndall admits that she is able to forget the rigid gender roles which dominate her life, because in his company she feels his equal. In a key passage, she says to him:

> I like you so much, I love you. When I am with you I never know that I am a woman and you are a man; I only know that we are both things that think. Other men when I am with them, whether I love them or not, they are mere bodies to me; but you are a spirit; I like you. (197)

Lyndall's comment regarding the affinity she feels with Waldo, expressed most emphatically in her words "I love you", might raise questions as to why Schreiner chose not to develop their relationship in the novel. A possible explanation might be that she was trying to avoid the happily-ever-after scenario so characteristic of the nineteenth-century novel, including the ground-breaking *Jane Eyre* (1847), out of the conviction that such endings in fiction must be postponed until fundamental changes in the relationships between men and women had come about in reality. Lyndall's statement that she sees other men as "mere bodies" could be taken to mean that because they only value her for her appearance, she cannot have more than a physical connection with them. Because women were valued largely for their beauty and charm, she

believed that their intellectual and emotional needs were ignored, making a spiritual connection between men and women impossible. She goes on to mention a further factor which results in an unsatisfactory love between men and women, namely women's economic dependence on men. Because women in general had no economic opportunities available to them, they often turned to marriage, motivated not by a need for companionship, but by financial considerations. Opposed to this reality is Lyndall's ideal of an entirely different basis for marriage:

> Then when that time comes… when love is no longer bought or sold, when it is not a means of making bread, when each woman's life is filled with earnest, independent labour, then love will come to her, a strange sudden sweetness breaking in upon her earnest work; not sought for, but found. (180)

Arbitrary gender divisions affected the possibility for connection and love, but it was Schreiner's most strongly held conviction that if women were granted the chance to support themselves, marriage would be something that they could choose freely rather than something that they must resort to because there were no other opportunities available to them. This is what she asserted in a letter to John T Lloyd: "… let love bind you, not a common account in the bank. I believe that the whole secret of happy [and] healthy [and] deathless unions is that marriages should be formed entirely independent of monetary considerations" (Schreiner 2014, 36).

For all Lyndall's radical rethinking of traditional roles, however, there is one conventional mode of thought that she is unable to break free of. Although she rejects the idea that the only possible source of fulfilment for women is through their devoted service in marriage, as wives and mothers, believing rather that other spheres should be open to them, she is still bound by the assumption that even in these other spheres *service* itself is a prerequisite for a woman's fulfilment. In fact, in this respect, Lyndall may, ironically, be more constrained by traditions than Em for, while Em is able to

endure the loss of her role of service when her relationship with Gregory Rose ends, Lyndall's inability to find anything to devote her life to, causes her great stress, and leads her to take desperate action towards the end of the novel. In this way, as in some others discussed above, Em is revealed as a more liberated character than is generally acknowledged.

After rejecting her lover's proposal, Lyndall herself proposes to Gregory. Her decision to marry him is most likely motivated by her desire to escape the farm which in turn may be seen as a deeper form of liberation. In Schreiner's earlier novel, Undine's decision to leave England seems to represent an escape from the constraints of conventional gender roles, which she thinks would be replaced by a freer and more independent life at the Cape. It may be that in Lyndall's case, the farm represents something like the same constrictions of gender stereotypes (figured not only in Tant Sannie but also Em), and her flight from it an attempt to break free of these, in a search for an occupation that will bring the different kind of fulfilment she craves. Although Lyndall's willingness to marry Gregory seems duplicitous, as it contradicts her own belief that there is nothing more contemptible than a marriage that is not based on love, Laurence Lerner finds a logic in her actions:

> [t]he answer seems to be that her belief in marriage for love is so demanding, and her expectations of it so high, that rather than a partial marriage she prefers a completely hollow union that pretends to nothing, and will presumably involve no sexual relationship, perhaps no further contact at all …. (1983, 73)

Lerner's assessment of Lyndall's proposal seems credible in the light of the pains she takes in making it clear to Gregory exactly what she is offering, and warning him not to expect anything more: "*You will give everything and expect nothing*. The knowledge that you are serving me is to be your reward; and you will have that" (222). They key concept of service is once again raised here but conceived in a new form, for, crucially,

it is her husband who will now be serving her. Her domineering way with Gregory recalls Albert Blair's assertive nature with Undine, only here the gender roles are reversed. On this point she later explains to her lover that he, Gregory, would make no demands of her: "If I marry him I shall shake him off my hand when it suits me. If I remained with him for twelve months he would never dare to kiss my hand" (226). However, Lyndall does not marry Gregory, but instead escapes with her lover to the Transvaal. A possible reason for her sudden change of mind might be her lover's willingness to take her away from the farm without the prospect of marriage. Thus, she chooses to leave with him as he offers her the prospect of independence in contrast to the associations with the farm and all its restrictions.

Lyndall's attempts at escape are unsuccessful, however. Despite the fact that she is able to remove herself physically from the imprisonment that the farm represents for her, she nevertheless remains obsessed by the idea that any fulfilment she achieves will only be through a selfless devotion to something or someone else, and it is ultimately her inability to overcome this conditioning that is her tragedy. In this regard she says, on the evening before leaving the farm with her lover: "One day I will love something utterly, and then I will be better" (233). Although this illustrates her entrapment within society's expectation of devoted and selfless service by women, the fact that she says "something" and not some*one*, shows a development in Schreiner's thinking which separates this novel from the earlier *Undine* in which fulfilment could only be achieved through personal relationships. Yet something of the same stress suffered by women who feel driven to find the more conventional forms of service also afflicts Lyndall. Her inability to devote herself to something greater than herself torments her with feelings of deep inadequacy and failure, as demonstrated by her questions at Otto's grave: "Why am I alone, so hard, so cold?" (232). As in the case of

Undine and Aunt Margaret, whose loss of purpose in life results in despair and breakdown, Lyndall experiences a kind of madness when she finds herself unable to meet this expectation of "loving something utterly". Her distress is witnessed in the constant restlessness of the search for an object of devotion in which she can lose herself. In this regard, she confesses, "It is eating my soul to its core – self, self, self! I cannot bear this life! I cannot breathe, I cannot live!" (232), illustrating the effects of her entrapment within a value system that puts self-sacrificing service before all else.

Lyndall's need to escape the self through service might suggest that after all she has not freed herself from the conventions she despises and that she is more similar to Em than she at first appears. In Lyndall, Schreiner might have been anticipating the problems that liberated women would face in overcoming society's deep-rooted expectations of them, as well as the frustrations they would experience in trying to escape conventional roles when, as yet, no alternatives were available to them. Lyndall's failure to find "something" to which she can dedicate her life leaves her in an empty and purposeless state which seems to have its physical manifestations in the death of her baby as well as her subsequent illness. On her last evening, she seems to show signs of delirium in her talk of "The Grey Dawn" (281) creeping up on her. In answer to Gregory's questions about this, she replies:

> I see the vision of a poor weak soul striving after good. It was not cut short; and, in the end, it learned through tears and such pain, that holiness is an infinite compassion for others; that greatness is to take the common things of life and walk truly among them; that… happiness is a great love and much serving. It was not cut short; and it loved what it had learned – it loved – and –. (276-277)

Here she is again shown to be similar to Em in that her idea of fulfilment remains rooted in dedication ("compassion for others", "much serving"). Up until her death, Lyndall's subversion of female gender roles is thus limited by her inability to overcome

the expectation that as a woman she can only be “good” if she sacrifices herself to a greater cause. This was because women were raised on the belief that an obligation of service was implicit in their identities; lacking an appropriate outlet, she feels trapped within herself: “self, self, self! I cannot bare this life! I cannot breathe!” (232). It would seem from her biography that Schreiner also experienced conflicts of this kind: despite her strong feminist views, she also felt the need to centre her life in a role of service, which took one early form in her desire to study medicine. She ascribed her choice to the fact “that a doctor’s is the most perfect of all lives; it satisfies the craving to know, and also the craving to serve” (Parkin-Gunelas 1991, 87). The fact that Lyndall is never able to find an alternative to traditionally feminine roles of service, like Schreiner’s own ambition to become a doctor, shows that she is perhaps not very different to Undine, who also finds no other role of service than those associated with her gender. On this point, one might again regard Em as a more radical character than Lyndall since Em is able to live within the restrictions which society sets, while Lyndall can neither break free from them nor live within them. It might be that Lyndall resigns herself to dying at the end of the novel because of her inability to find some service to live for – certainly, no other satisfactory explanation is given for her illness, beyond the information that she went out one night in the rain to visit her baby’s grave and fell mortally ill.

Despite her failure to escape the traditional woman’s role of selfless service, Lyndall is redeemed, to an extent, by her uncompromising autonomy with regard to romantic relationships. She rejects her lover’s plea to be allowed to return to her even though she feels isolated. No account is given for why their relationship ends, apart from the suggestion that it was she who broke it off. Lyndall receives a letter from her lover, begging her to allow him to return:

> Let me come back to you! My darling, let me put my hand round you, and guard you from the world. As my wife they shall never touch you. I have learned to love you more wisely, more tenderly, than of old; you shall have perfect freedom. Lyndall, grand little woman, for your own sake be my wife! (274-275)

Although he promises her "perfect freedom", Lyndall refuses him, explaining that "… I cannot be bound to one whom I love as I love you" (275). Her dauntless commitment to her principles in this respect is the most powerful contradiction of the idea that women were weak and emotional. Furthermore, her rejection of her lover and her courage in facing her illness alone also subverts the "happily-ever-after" convention of so many other novels written at the time. Far from wanting a man to rescue her, Lyndall is determined to remain defiantly independent in the face of all her disappointments, writing to her lover: "I am not afraid of the world – I will fight the world" (275). On the topic of Lyndall's death Carrol Barash comments that her "… feminist rhetoric is at odds with the novel's plot: Without explanation, Lyndall destroys herself by capitulating to the unnamed stranger who wishes only to master her. She becomes pregnant but the child dies, and the pain of losing this new-born daughter stalks her through her own slow death" (1989, 272). However, Lyndall's death is not due to a failure of will, but the result of the rigid gender conventions of her time, which Barash also concedes: "… stories don't change until the social order changes; the act of writing political fiction involves straining against social constructs, enabling them to change" (1989, 270). Barash's judgment is supported by David Waterman:

> … Lyndall seems to have chosen death, after discovering that the suffering endured by a child/woman who resists a dominant patriarchal society is worse than death. But like the cat floating in the pond, death was not really chosen, but imposed by the conditions of a society which will not tolerate dissent. The odds against gaining a share of power, especially if one refuses to accept the position which society has dictated for a subject, are overwhelming…. The world-at-large, with a notable exception, does not accept Lyndall's masculinisation while she attempts to gain admittance to the patriarchal power structure .... (1997, 57)

Even if she had not died at the end of the novel, Lyndall's struggle would have been futile, as it was to take many years before the freedoms she seeks would become actual possibilities for women. This interpretation of her death is further supported by Ruth Parkin-Gunelas who states that "… her [Schreiner's] characters… are driven by antisocial impulses, each in the end is crushed by a society that puts duty and conformity before all else" (1991, 77). Thus, although Schreiner's novel does not end optimistically for Lyndall, this does not make it any less subversive. On the issue of gender roles, she ultimately shows that Lyndall's undoing is the result of the rigid constraints imposed by society, and that her future, as well as that of all other women who might similarly seek alternative roles for themselves, cannot be happy until society itself is reformed.

Chapter 3

Masculine Gender Subversion in *The Story of an African Farm*

Up to this point discussion has focussed on gender subversion in Schreiner's female characters, but now attention will be given to her male characters. This chapter will explore Schreiner's subversion of masculine gender expectations in *The Story of an African Farm*. As with her subversion of female gender roles, she demonstrates that masculine gender roles are social constructs and, in this, probably does her most original work. This statement is supported by the fact that although Feminism as a movement began in the late nineteenth century, Gender Studies, which extends its scope of study to men's studies and Queer Studies, developed as a serious academic field only a century later, making Schreiner a pioneer in this field. She explores the constructed nature of masculinity through her established technique of doubling, with the male characters Gregory and Waldo serving as foils for each other, in addition to finding their corresponding doubles in the female characters in the novel, Em and Lyndall. Gregory's conventionally "feminine" behaviour is highlighted through his affinity with Em, especially with regard to their shared view of love as service. At the same time, the constructed nature of masculinity is emphasised through Waldo's deviance from what was considered conventional masculine behaviour and the inversion of male and female gender characteristics between him and Lyndall.

In the character of Gregory Rose, Olive Schreiner subverts common masculine gender expectations by having him exhibit characteristics regarded as conventionally feminine. Gregory's feminine nature is suggested from his first appearance in the

novel. His behaviour can immediately be identified as subversive of gender stereotypes if one takes into account that "[s]ience, religion and empirical deductions described the man as active, rational and competent …" (Odubajo and Odubajo 2017, 9226), for Gregory is repeatedly portrayed as emotional and meek. This is communicated by his self-pitying behaviour as he sits outside his lodgings:

> Before the door sat Gregory Rose in his shirtsleeves, on a campstool, and ever and anon he sighed deeply. There was that in his countenance for which even his depressing circumstances failed to account. Again and again, he looked at the little kopje, at the milk pail at his side, and at the brown pony, who a short way off cropped the dry bushes – and sighed. (155)

Gregory's tendency towards self-pity is further highlighted by comparison with, all of Schreiner's female characters who seem stoical when confronted with their own difficulties. Even Em does not succumb to feelings of defeatism despite the disappointments she endures. Yet, ironically, for all Gregory's overtly "feminine" tendency towards emotion, particularly in the early stages, he is anxious about adequately displaying his masculinity. This comes to the fore in the revision he makes in the letter to his sister, beginning: "When I look up into the little glass that hangs opposite me, I wonder if that changed and sad face …" (156), but then starting over, concerned that his self-consciousness might be interpreted as "conceited" or "unmanly" (157). References to mirrors like this "little glass", traditionally associated with feminine vanity, in fact become a motif in the novel, repeatedly suggesting Gregory's female inclinations. From the contents of his letter, it is also made apparent that his more conventionally feminine traits, which he himself refers to as his "fine nature" (157), have opened him up to mockery and ridicule:

> You know what sorrows I have passed through, Jemima; how unjustly I was always treated at school, the masters keeping me back and calling me a blockhead, though, as they themselves allowed, I had the best memory of any boy in the school, and could repeat whole books from beginning to end. You know how cruelly father always used me, calling

> me a noodle and a milksop, just because he couldn't understand my fine nature. (157)

The treatment Gregory reports having received from his father and schoolmasters, testifies to the consequences of not acting out one's gender adequately. Ironically, despite the hurt he experiences at being mocked for his effeminate nature, he himself later makes similar disparaging remarks to Lyndall about Waldo (220) who does not fully conform to society's ideas regarding what is proper behaviour for men. This illustrates how entrenched in his own thinking are the assumptions and expectations about gender. Further evidence of Gregory's preoccupation with masculinity and his awareness of what is considered manly behaviour are his words to his sister: "I have borne it all, not as a woman, who whines for every touch, but as a man should – in silence" (157). Gregory's words echo the standard views of women's nature as "governed more by feeling than by reason, particularly subject to the impact of sensations from the outside world…" (Rendall 1990, 31). His remark on the appropriate way to react if one is a man is ironic as he will repeatedly deviate from this himself, and show exactly the kind of responses conventionally expected of women. Conversely, if there is a character in the novel who does bear suffering "in silence" and without whining, it is, as we have seen, the young girl, Lyndall.

Gregory might possibly have grasped the performative nature of gender through his experiences of being ostracised in his youth. His realisation of the repercussions if one does not act one's gender "appropriately" motivates him to put on a show of masculinity, as suggested by the ostentatiously masculine description of his appearance: "… with shining spurs, an ostrich feather in his hat, and a silver headed whip" (182). His clothing serves as an example of what Judith Butler terms gender being a "styli[s]ed repetition of acts" (Butler 2004, 901), in this case the repetition of

acts regarded as masculine constituting a masculine identity rather than (conversely) any fixed and timeless "gender" that gives rise to the acts. Butler elaborates on the point:

> …[I]f gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. (Butler 2004, 901)

As she makes explicit, there is no innate or true ideal of masculinity but instead the concept of masculinity is constituted through the performance of specific acts: "[b]ecause there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalises nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; without those acts, there would be no gender at all" (Butler 2004, 903). Consequently, Gregory's deviant behaviour (asserting his "fine nature") is treated by society as a transgression in order to preserve the idea that gender is intrinsically linked to biology and therefore fixed. He is thus "punished" because his behaviour threatens the stability of gender binaries. Strict gender binaries are shown throughout Schreiner's fiction to cause great suffering, making those who do not conform to them feel like outsiders. In *From Man to Man* (1926), for example, Rebekah tells her sons about how she is ridiculed for not wearing what was deemed appropriate dress for women:

> … [w]hen I go down the Government Avenue, and the coloured girls there laugh because they see I don't wear stays as the other women do. It's as if a knife ran into me under my ribs; that in years to come people will wonder women could be so mad and foolish to deform themselves. And yet, when these women laugh at me, I am so full of pain I can hardly walk down to the station; and when I come home I feel I want to creep on to the bed and cry. (Schreiner [1926] 2015, 381)

Rebekah's error consists largely in her failure to conform with expectations of *white* women, specifically, in her colonial society, and the humiliation she is made to feel is emphasised by the fact that the mockery comes from those socially beneath her, the

inferior “coloured girls”. As Ann Heilmann suggests, the “lack of ‘feminine’ undergarments could [also] serve as a metaphor for social degradation” (122, 2000). In this regard, the New Woman’s flouting of what was deemed proper in terms of women’s dress was often interpreted as a threat to traditional Victorian values. More fundamentally, the collapse of gender conventions was equated with the disintegration of social morality. This concern is reflected in the winning lines chosen in a competition for the best definition of the New Woman (1894):

> She flouts Love’s caresses
> Reforms ladies’ dresses
> And scorns the Man-Monster’s tirade;
> She seems scarcely human
> This mannish New Woman
> This Queen of the Blushless Brigade.
> (Doan 2001, 100)

Interestingly, all the characters in the novel take Gregory’s performance of his gender at face value. In his relationship with Em, he puts on a show of dominance and assertiveness because he believes that, as a man, this is the role that he is supposed to enact. However, this assumption is also harboured by Em whose expectations about married life take for granted a domineering husband. Illustrating this point, she imagines Gregory coming home at the end of the day and calling out to her: “Wife, some coffee!” (165). It is only Lyndall, with her perceptive nature, who is able to recognise that Gregory’s masculine behaviour is a façade and that he identifies more with a conventionally feminine gender role. Thus, she remarks about him: “There… goes a true woman – one born for the sphere that some women have to fill without being born for it. How happy he would be sewing frills into little girls’ frocks, and how pretty he would look sitting in a parlour, with a rough man making love to him!” (182). Lyndall’s words reveal her progressiveness, for she does not equate gender with biology. And, of course, events in the novel prove her right in this view of Gregory’s

essential femininity, when he takes on the role of Lyndall's nurse and dedicates himself to serving her, in the clearest possible enactment of the female stereotype of the day.

Gregory's relationship with Em is an important way Schreiner uses to display his ambiguous gender identity. On the one hand, his relationship conveys stereotypical male behaviour enabling him to assert his masculinity through the dominant role that it allows him to play, but perhaps more importantly, which Em also encourages him to play. His "love" for her could be a symptom of his attempts to act his gender correctly. In trying to come across as masculine, he chooses someone who seems to be the personification of conventional Victorian womanhood. His love for her is thus nothing more than an attempt to conform to the gender expectations of his time. On the other hand, Gregory's relationship with Em is used by Schreiner to subvert that masculinity, witnessed in his inappropriately doting attitude to Em, who occupies his thoughts completely, and his overemotional and sentimental letter to his sister communicating this love (157-158). He even goes so far as to contemplate suicide if Em refuses his proposal, feeling that a life without her would be meaningless. Precisely this extreme value attached to romantic love as the only form of fulfilment has already been witnessed in Undine's despondence when Albert ends their betrothal. Gregory's complete immersion of himself in personal relationships would have been regarded as effeminate, because it was women alone who, being denied any other means of fulfilment in public or professional life, had to content themselves with personal relationships. Gregory attempts to sustain his façade of dominance by demanding that Em love no one but him, also recalling Albert Blair's assertive nature with Undine; however, this is immediately followed by Gregory's dramatic declaration: "if you are not my wife, I cannot live. I have never loved another woman, and I never shall! – never, never" (161) making his attempts at dominance farcical and hollow. This seems

to be even more effectively emphasised when in a post-script to his letter communicating his intention to kill himself should Em refuse him, he adds: "… Tell mother to take care of my pearl studs. I left them in the washhand-stand drawer. Don't let the children get hold of them" (159). The bathos of this comment serves to indicate the superficial nature of his feelings. His declaration of love is made even more ridiculous by the fact that, after demanding that Em love no one else but him, he is the one whose affections shift, to Lyndall.

Gregory further attempts to act his gender correctly through his opinions about women. Behind his façade of masculinity, he writes to his sister complaining of Lyndall's headstrong nature. He seems to endorse the commonly held belief that it was natural that men be dominant and women submissive, writing to his sister: "If I had a wife with pride I'd make her give it up, *sharp*. I don't believe in a man who can't make a woman obey him" (194). With this comment in mind, we can understand the attraction that a relationship with Em would hold for him, conforming to his ideas of conventional romantic relationships between men and women. However, it becomes clear that these sentiments are only expressed in an attempt to act out his gender convincingly; they clearly do not reflect his true opinions, as he very enthusiastically allows himself to be ruled by Lyndall later on. Gregory's relationship with her takes this subversion of masculine gender roles further. With Lyndall he is docile and agreeable, and his only concern is her happiness. In his relationship with Lyndall, furthermore, as in the romantic attachments of Undine and Em, the idea of love also seems to be synonymous with service.

It is through Gregory's relationship with Lyndall that he most clearly undermines Victorian masculine gender conceptions. This is made apparent in the intellectual role

reversal between the two characters, but more particularly in Gregory's willingness to exchange his role of dominance for one of subservience. He tries to impress Lyndall with his philosophical nature, but his attempts have the opposite effect of exposing him as unoriginal and ignorant. He talks about love and remarks that he wrote an essay on the subject many years ago, but the only words that he can recall – "Love is something that you feel in your heart" (217) – are fatuous and clichéd. The role reversal between Gregory and Lyndall is made most evident through his willingness to be subservient and his acceptance of her dominant nature. This is demonstrated in his preoccupation with being of service to her at Tant Sannie's wedding:

> "May I not bring you a stove, Miss Lyndall, to put your feet on?"
> "Thank you."
> He sought for one, and put it under her feet.
> "There is a draught from that broken window; shall I stuff something in the pane?"
> "No; we want air."
> Gregory looked round but, nothing else suggesting itself, he sat down on a box on the opposite side of the door. (200)

A further example illustrating his subservience is his willingness to marry Lyndall despite knowing she does not love him in return (222). In his eagerness to please her, their relationship resembles that of Undine's and Albert Blair's, only here the roles are reversed. Undine becomes despondent and loses all interest in life when Albert Blair breaks off their engagement, and the same behaviour is repeated by Gregory when Lyndall runs off with her lover. As with Undine, for whom all fails when her relationship fails, Gregory feels utterly devastated when he loses Lyndall (236). The effect that this loss has on him is reflected in his words to Em:

> People say, forget, forget! …. They are mad! They are fools! Do they say so to men who are dying of thirst – forget, forget? Why is it only to us they say so? It is a lie to say that time makes it easy; it is afterwards, afterwards that it eats in at your heart. All these months…. I have lived here quietly, day after day, as if I cared for what I ate, and what I drank, and what I did! I care for nothing! I cannot bear it! I will not! Forget, forget! (238-239)

While Gregory pines after Lyndall, Em thinks of domestic tasks for him to carry out in order to distract him from his heartache (236). The feminine nature of the tasks of housekeeping possibly prepares the reader for his more obvious gender switch later in the narrative when he tries on women's clothes. Em makes him sort through the loft where he comes across some of her mother's old dresses, which he handles with admiration and care before secretively trying one on (237). Not only does this action bear out Lyndall's previous assertion of his feminine inclinations, but it also foreshadows his transvestitism in later chapters. In the incident of trying on the women's clothes in the loft, however, the rigid nature of gender constraints again comes to the fore through Gregory's fear of being discovered by Em, and he hurriedly pulls off the dress. Shortly after this scene he leaves the farm, no longer able to bear the misery of being separated from Lyndall and goes in search of her. In his words to Em, "I am not going to speak to her… only to see her; only to stand sometimes in a place where she has stood" (239), Gregory shows his deep devotion to Lyndall as well as the development of his love from the empty and self-absorbed condition he had demonstrated in his previous relationship, with Em. After months of tracking Lyndall's movements, he finally discovers her staying at an inn, where his selfless dedication to her is proved again. Upon discovering that she is ill and in need of a nurse, he disguises himself as a woman, thus enabling him to care for her:

> Now he must be up and doing. He drew from his breast pocket a little sixpenny looking-glass, and hung it on one of the roots that stuck out from the bank. Then he dressed himself in one of the old-fashioned gowns and a great pinked-out collar. Then he took out a razor. Tuft by tuft the soft brown beard fell down into the sand and the little ants took it to line their nests with. Then the glass showed a face surrounded by a frilled cap, white as a woman's, with a little mouth, a very short upper lip and receding chin. (265)

The constructed nature of gender is illustrated again here. As already mentioned, the "looking glass" is a recurring motif in the novel primarily as an emblem of femininity,

and therefore its appearance here is a signal of Gregory's gender change. Although throughout his characterisation, leading up to this point, there have been numerous hints of an underlying femininity, it is at this moment of physical transformation where he cuts off his beard and dons women's clothing that this issue is most boldly asserted.

The theme of crossdressing was a common metaphor for the constructed nature of gender, as Ann Heilmann has noted, although, it was most often used in relation to women:

> A cultural phenomenon and vibrant metaphor long before the *fin de siècle*, women's cross-dressing was reinvigorated by the Victorian women's movement because, by demonstrating the essential performativity of gender, it enabled feminists to challenge biological notions of sexual difference deployed to rationalise women's political disempowerment as the product of "nature". Feminists were keen to celebrate activist forebears and military heroines whose cross-dressing exploits showed that it was costume, not the body, which inscribed gender and assigned social power to the wearer. (2000, 118)

Through Gregory's crossdressing, Schreiner reveals that her thinking regarding gender was ahead of her time as she was one of the first writers to take this metaphor and to apply it to men. Furthermore, Gregory's role specifically as a *nurse* is additionally subversive of gender conventions, nursing being generally seen as a woman's occupation since its duties so clearly corresponded with conventional notions of womanhood. This was emphasised by the image conveyed in Florence Nightingale's hugely influential campaign, "of the nurse as subordinate, nurturing, domestic, humble, and self-sacrificing, as well as not too educated …" (Barrett-Landua and Henle 2014, 11). The gender bias towards nursing as a female profession was so deep rooted that the American Nursing Association excluded men from nursing until 1930, when as a "result of a bylaw amendment, provision was made for male nurses to become members" (Barrett-Landua and Henle 2014, 11). The idea emphasised by theorists like Judith Butler, that gender is a social formation derived at least partly from

the repeated performance of significant acts, is reflected in the novel by the doctor's praise of Gregory's nursing skills: "She is the most experienced nurse I ever came in contact with" (268). The fact that Gregory is able to pass himself off as woman so successfully simply through performing these duties bears out Butler's idea that gender is not the natural product of a person's sex, but rather the wholly contrived effect of a particular set of acts and that it is these acts that are interpreted as either masculine or feminine. Virginia Woolf would later make a similar statement on the constructed nature of gender through external performance, in her biographical novel *Orlando* (1928): "…[i]t is clothes that wear us and not we them; we make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking" (1994, 144). The fact that Gregory appears a more selfless and thoughtful person when he enacts a conventionally feminine role could be indicative of Schreiner's belief in the positive effects that follow when people are allowed to choose and act their genders freely, instead of society "forcing" them to conform to a specific gender based on their sex. In his capacity as nurse, we see the progress Gregory has made from the arrogant and selfish lover of Em, when he tried to repress his true nature, to the caring and sympathetic nurse of Lyndall, when he embraces it. This is further demonstrated in the skill with which he fulfils his role as Lyndall's carer: "Thank you!", she responds, "that is so nice. Other people hurt me when they touch me… Thank you!" (268). Gregory's selfless dedication to her is also demonstrated by the fact that he obeys her every order without hesitation or question, keeping true to his earlier assertion that his only wish is to be near her (239). All her orders – "Bring me food"; "Give me my clothes"; "Now open the shutter wide" and "Now bring my books to me" (270-271) – only elicit from him a quiet willingness to obey. Furthermore, his tenderness in his devotion to her is shown when she asks him to rub her feet: "He

knelt down at the foot of the bed and took the tiny foot in his hand; it was swollen and unsightly now, but as he touched it he bent down and covered it with kisses" (267).

Gregory's development from the false masculine to his true female gender not only demonstrates the artificial nature of gender roles, but also illustrates the damaging consequences of denying one's true nature. In agreeing at the end of the novel to marry Em, at least partly because of Lyndall's wishes, Gregory finds himself forced to return to his more conventional gender role as husband, thus abandoning the chance to fulfil himself more authentically in his new-found identity. In this way, his story can be seen to parallel Lyndall's tragedy, for just as she is denied access to the masculine sphere, so Gregory is eventually forced to give up his feminine role and revert to his masculine masquerade. Victorian society's intolerance when it came to ideas that upset rigid beliefs regarding gender roles is raised by Ruth Parkin-Gounelas as an explanation of one contemporary reaction to Schreiner's novel. She suggests that it was Schreiner's subversive treatment of gender particularly in the portrait of Gregory's "womanhood" "… that made one Worcestershire community in the 1880s appalled to find such a book on its library shelves, or obliged one particular Victorian woman to use tongs to place it on the fire!" (1991, 103).

Ironically, however, despite the provocative nature of Schreiner's portrait of gender fluidity through Gregory's transition to a more feminine identity, it has to be recognised that the precise nature of that identity, as it is manifested in his behaviour towards Lyndall, is entirely in conformity with the most traditional stereotypes of womanhood: submissive, selfless and subservient. Although daring in its conception, Schreiner's subversive handling of gender in the story of Gregory is compromised by the fact that what happens is simply the exchange by Gregory of one set of stereotypes for another,

without in any way questioning either of them. If anything, in fact, Gregory's experience of gender transitioning, in which he adopts the persona of the devoted nurse, does much to confirm and reinforce the conventional ideas of the woman's role, by equating it with service.

Yet, if the novel betrays a limitation in its challenge to gender stereotypes in the story of Gregory, there is another male character who seems to offer a more complex critique of gender conventions. While Gregory's subversion entails a reversal of gender roles and an embracing of conventional femininity in the extreme, Waldo offers alternative possibilities of forgoing gender altogether. These possibilities seem to blur the neat gender binaries which society tries to put forward as natural. Like Gregory, Waldo subverts masculine gender expectations, but his subversion is more radical in that, rather than align himself with either gender, he seems to transcend gender. Waldo does not find fulfilment through personal relationship, as Gregory does, nor through some form of a career, as was the conventional expectation, but from an entirely different source, and thereby escapes rigid gender binaries completely.

At the beginning of the novel, the young Waldo is plagued by feelings of inadequacy, stemming from the belief that he is somehow wicked or unlovable. Similar feelings of inadequacy can be seen in Em, as demonstrated in her relationship with Gregory Rose, as well as in the earlier portrayal of Undine's relations with Albert Blair. These feelings worsen when Waldo comes to believe that God has forsaken him and he becomes almost obsessive. Initially, the boy tests God's love by making Him a sacrifice of the small meal he has taken with him into the veld, where he asks God to send fire down from heaven to burn his mutton chop, quoting from the Bible: "Whosoever shall say unto this mountain, [b]e thou cast into the sea, nothing doubting,

it shall be done" (9). However, when nothing happens after he has waited all day, he gives up and draws the conclusion: "I had faith. No fire came. I am like Cain – I am not his. He will not hear my prayer. God hates me" (10). Waldo subsequently ascribes what he sees as God's abandoning him to a flaw in himself, believing that he is somehow unworthy of His love. Although the root of his despair is not made explicit, it could be inferred from similar instances of mental breakdown in *Undine* that Waldo's obsessions have their origin in his sense of his deviant nature and his inability to conform to the gender expectations of his time. These feelings are another aspect of Schreiner's treatment of gender stereotypes in her male characterisations. Elsewhere in the novel, masculinity is associated with self-assuredness and dominance, seen in characters such as Bonaparte Blenkins, Lyndall's lover and Waldo's Stranger. However, it is not only Waldo's uncertainties and self-loathing that point to a deviation from traditional male stereotypes, but also his emotional response to these feelings. The narrator describes how "He felt horribly lonely. There was not one thing so wicked as he in all the world, and he knew it. He folded his arms and began to cry – not aloud; he sobbed without making any sound, and his tears left scorched marks where they fell" (11). Importantly, however, although "[c]rying, for males, is a sign of weakness, sensitivity, emotionalism, and other feminine traits" (Ross and Mirowsky 1984, 139), Waldo's crying can be distinguished from Em's very emotional "howling" (67) as well as Gregory's self-pitying outbursts. Differing from these characters' emotional response to their sadness, Waldo's crying ("not aloud; he sobbed without making a sound") carries no suggestion of the feminine, so that we seem to find in him the possibility of a character who conforms to neither kind of conventional gender stereotyping, the self-confident male or the hysterical female. It is in standing outside

gender roles in this way, as an ungendered figure, that Waldo points to Schreiner's most intriguing attempt at gender subversion in her fiction.

Waldo subverts conventional male gender expectations through his gentle and sensitive nature, revealed early in the novel by his anxiety over people who are bound for damnation: "'Stop them! Stop them!... Oh, God, God! Save them!' He cried in agony. 'Only some; only a few! Only for each moment I am praying here one!' He folded his little hands upon his head. 'God! God! save them!'" (6). Waldo's deeply sensitive nature has the effect of alienating him from his small community on the farm. From a young age, he is driven into a solitary life by the adults' propensity for cruelty, represented by characters such as Tant Sannie and Bonaparte Blenkins. In order to shield himself from these aspects of his life, Waldo becomes completely passive and as such resists conformity with any gender stereotypes, male or female. He is not driven to find fulfilment through personal relationships, like Em and Gregory; he does not pursue wealth as in the cases of Bonaparte Blenkins and Albert Blair; and he does not seek a career, or pursue some greater cause to which he can devote himself, like Lyndall. Unlike the rest of Schreiner's characters, Waldo has no aspirations that drive him, but instead leads a life that seems a remote inwardness. Commenting on the boy Waldo, Tant Sannie says: "He never *was* like other children. The dear Lord knows, if he doesn't walk alone for hours talking to himself. If you sit in the room with him you can see his lips moving the whole time; and if you talk to him twenty times he does not hear you. Daft-eyes; he's as mad as mad can be" (80). In its ungendered reference to "other children", Tant Sannie's description contributes to Waldo's unique characterisation as one who stands outside gender categories. The essential strangeness of his character is repeatedly commented on. For example, later in the novel, Gregory more or less reiterates Tant Sannie's words about Waldo, in a

conversation with Lyndall: "… to me he looks like a fool. To walk about always in that dead and alive sort of way, muttering to himself like an old Kaffir witch-doctor! He works hard enough, but it's always as though he didn't know what he was doing. You don't know how he looks to a person who sees him for the first time" (220). Words such as "mad" and "witchdoctor", linked by their associations of the abnormal or the "other", indicate the special space of social unorthodoxy in which Waldo seems to exist, as well as the suspicion with which he is regarded as a result. He becomes even more alienated from people after leaving the farm, as seen in his relations with a fellow clerk (245) and the ox-driver (250-251), whose heartlessness repels him. Later on, he describes his difficulty in connecting with people in a letter to Lyndall: "If the world was all children I could like it; but men and women draw me so strangely, and then press me away, till I am in agony. I was not meant to live among people" (254). With its message of disconnection, from *both* "men and women" equally, this seems to indicate that Waldo feels there is no a place for him in a gendered society. More importantly, perhaps, he accepts this as his fate – "I was not meant to live among people" – and in doing so presents us with a vivid contrast to his great counterpart in the novel, who is similarly challenged by the gender conventions of her society, which she refuses to accept.

While Lyndall fights the world trying to force it to accommodate her, and exhausts herself in the process, Waldo finds a meaningful outlet for his energies within the private space of his existence. One could reach the conclusion that the biggest challenge presented in the novel, in which Lyndall falls short but Waldo succeeds, is not to question society's view of gender, but one's own. As seen in the previous Chapter, despite her radical position on social issues, Lyndall has in fact internalised many conventional ideas about gender and it is often her inability to relinquish these

beliefs that leads her to feel distraught and guilt-ridden. An explanation suggested earlier in this study for the reason why Lyndall finds it so difficult to cast off these ideas is because she has nothing with which to replace them. For Waldo, on the other hand, this problem does not exist, as he has managed to free himself from social conventions, finding another outlet for his energy which provides him with the sense of fulfilment that "something to love" which eludes Lyndall. This outlet comes in the form of the natural world, with which Waldo feels a powerful bond, seen at various stages, but perhaps most vividly in his account of a setting (a gully in which he pauses on his long walk back to the farm) in which water, trees, and stars combine in a vision of unity that incorporates him inseparably. "Everything was still", he says to Lyndall, "but those leaves were quivering, quivering. I stood on the sand, I could not go away. Does it seem strange … that it should have made me so happy … how near I felt to things we cannot see but always feel" (255). What is especially important about the natural world for Waldo is that in its wholeness it transcends the artificial structures imposed by his society, so that he does not have to exchange one gender role for another, but can escape gender roles completely, as the most artificial of all the structures. His affinity with nature should be understood in terms of the organic character with which it opposes the artificial character of society and, more particularly, the gender constructions of the time. Contrastingly, Lyndall has nothing that provides her with such a sense of fulfilment, leaving her frustrated and disappointed when her efforts to fight the world and to bend it to her will prove ineffective. While her subversiveness constantly gnaws at her, driving her to the point of insanity, Waldo is able to find an escape from society's expectations of him. The escape that he finds in the natural world is illustrated by his dreamy and enraptured tone as he imagines the stones talking to him:

> Sometimes… I lie under there with my sheep, and it seems that the stones are really speaking – speaking of the old things, of the time when the strange fishes and animals that are turned into stone now, and the lakes were here; and then of the time when the little Bushmen lived here, so small and so ugly, and used to sleep in the wild dog holes, and in the sloots …. (19)

Waldo's passive musings reveal his deviance from the masculine norm as "[m]asculinity [was] associated with an instrumental orientation, central to which [was] agency, in turn characterised by focusing on the self and oriented toward independence and the achievement of personal goals" (Matud 2019, 2). Although his musings indicate his inquisitive nature, like Lyndall's, there is an important difference between their desire for knowledge. While Lyndall hungers for learning because she hopes it will gain her "power", and access to a world denied her as a woman, Waldo's yearning for knowledge is for its own sake as it allows him to feel closer to nature. Unlike Lyndall, he does not want knowledge as a means of gaining power or influence, but because of a deep-rooted need to understand the world around him. In support of this, Cherry Clayton states, "[Waldo] does not seek – as Lyndall does – to gain secular power but to discover cosmic harmony" (Marquard 1983, 149). Thus, he seeks something beyond the rigid constructions and limitations of society, where gender categories collapse or are fused. This idea of cosmic harmony described by Clayton is expressed by Waldo himself. Later in the novel, after learning of Lyndall's death, he is initially distressed about man's mortality as he struggles to believe in the existence of a hereafter, but he finally finds peace in the idea of nature's wholeness, of which we are a part

> No death, no death … there is that which never dies – which abides. It is but the individual that perishes, the whole remains. It is the organism that vanishes, the atoms are there. It is but the man that dies, the Universal Whole of which he is part reworks him into its inmost self. For the little soul that cries aloud for continued personal existence for itself and its beloved, there is no help. For the soul which knows itself no more as a unit, but as a part of the Universal Unity of which the Beloved also

> is a part; which feels within itself the throb of the Universal Life; for that soul there is no death. (288)

When Waldo finally leaves the farm his motivation is not to gain wealth or success but because he does not want to work under Gregory. One might make a connection between his leaving the farm and Lyndall's. Just as Lyndall's leaving is an attempt to escape the rigid gender restrictions of her time, the farm being a symbol of this, Waldo might be seen as seeking similar freedoms. He explains his plans for the future to Lyndall as simply to "travel – see the world" (203) again highlighting his unambitious nature, which contradicts traditional masculine gender expectations, namely that men were naturally suited for the public sphere. Lyndall highlights how subversive Waldo is in this regard by pointing out that in children's upbringing, work was essential for defining masculinity:

> To you it says: *Work*; and to us it says: *Seem*! To you it says: As you approximate to man's highest ideal of God, as your arm is strong and your knowledge great, and the power to labour is with you, so you shall gain all that human heart desires. To us it says: Strength shall not help you, nor knowledge, nor labour. You shall gain what men gain, but by other means. And so the world makes men and women. (172)

Lyndall's words "the world makes men and women" are important as expressing precisely the artificiality of society's gender constructions that Waldo rejects and tries to free himself from when he decides to leave the farm. Further evidence of the association of masculinity with work is found in Gregory Rose's critical response when Waldo does not "properly" act his gender: "Do you think now, Miss Lyndall, that he'll ever have anything in the world – that German, I mean – money enough to support a wife on, and all that sort of thing? I don't. He's what *I* call soft" (220). Gregory's comment reveals that a man was thought less of, if he did not engage in a trade that enabled him to make enough money to support a family. Lyndall has learnt from

experience that society does not tolerate deviance from expected gender roles; therefore, she encourages Waldo to be more ambitious, understanding that the world does not respond kindly towards men who are directionless and uncertain about what they want from life: “That is no plan … If you go into the world aimless, without a definite object, dreaming – dreaming, you will be definitely defeated, bamboozled, knocked this way and that” (203). Lyndall’s predictions prove accurate, as Waldo is unsuccessful, and eventually rejects the public sphere and returns to the farm, having been alienated by the aggression, cruelty and selfishness that seem to be the foundation upon which materialistic, patriarchal society is based. We see evidence of this when a fellow clerk borrows his horse and rides her to death, commenting to Waldo: “It didn’t take much to kill *that* bag of bones, whose master sleeps in a packing case …” (246), as well as when his master cruelly beats one of the oxen for not obeying him. One also sees evidence of his unworldliness through the lack of consideration he gives to wealth, influence and power when he invents his sheep-shearing machine. Although he is proud of his invention, his thoughts are in no way mercenary. The only consideration he gives to money is that it will enable him to bring happiness to the people he loves: “… a black hat for my dadda – for Lyndall a blue silk, very light: and a purple one like the earth-bells and white shoes” (72). In this, he resembles Em (as well as Undine) in his selfless prioritisation of others and their happiness. As already mentioned, it might be that Waldo’s innocence and unworldliness are presented as his shield against harsher social realities. On this point Tara MacDonald “… read[s] [his] childishness … as a striking rejection of colonial manhood and the violence and capitalistic desires associated with such an ideal …. [T]he only way for Waldo to deny being a colonial man is for him, in some way, to remain a child” (2015, 134). MacDonald’s comparison of Waldo to a child reinforces

the idea that he falls outside rigid gender roles, as the innocence associated with young children isolates them from the artificial gender constructions which will increasingly be forced upon them as they grow up. Furthermore, this innocence, in its associations with the uncorrupted and organic, can be linked to the natural world in which Waldo displays such a keen interest.

Tara MacDonald's statement regarding Waldo's childishness has further merit if one considers the alienation he feels amongst adults and the affinity he feels with children, possibly, because they are innocent and generally devoid of cruelty and deceit. This affinity that he has with children is illustrated by his interaction with the little girl he meets working as a clerk in the shoe shop: "When I put out my arm she let me take her and sit her on my knee. She kissed me with her soft mouth. We were happy till the nurse-girl came and shook her, and asked her if she was not ashamed to sit on the knee of that strange man" (254). The ease and naturalness of their exchange indicates that Waldo successfully resists conventional masculine gender roles by remaining a child himself. It is possibly also this childlike innocence that enables him to experience nature so completely and without constraint. This has links with Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, "Nature" (1836), a transcendentalist text encouraging a new way of appreciating the natural world. Schreiner identified with many of Emerson's ideas, and the fact that Waldo shares his name with the writer may encourage the idea that Waldo has an Emersonian approach to life. In his essay, Emerson explains that a return to childhood and the innocence it embodies is required to fully appreciate the joys of the natural world:

> To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye of the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy

> even in the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth becomes part of his daily food. In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows. (Emerson [1836] 2014, 19)

Influenced by Emerson's central concept of nature as a kind of secular scripture, Schreiner possibly intended to present Waldo's turn to nature as a solution to his religious crisis, referred to earlier in this chapter, when he feels alienated from God's love. Keeping in mind that *The Story of an African Farm* was, to a degree, *Undine* rewritten, it is possible to make a link between Undine's break from Christianity, and what it stands for in terms of gender roles, and Waldo's break from Christianity and his subsequent turning to nature and what it stands for. For Undine, atheism, or more particularly the critical thinking it implies, signifies her break from traditional gender roles, since women were believed incapable of serious thought. In Waldo's case, the break from Christianity might also signify a break from traditional gender roles, as Christian doctrine at the time often rationalised the patriarchal structure of society and therefore reinforced deeply conservative ideas about gender roles. Waldo clearly has a liberated view of gender, evidenced by his sympathy for Lyndall's ideas about the position of women, as well as by his treatment of her, personally, as an equal, if not superior. A connection can perhaps be drawn between his break from traditional Christian beliefs and his unorthodox views on gender roles, freed as he has become from such rigid binaries.

It is, finally, in the relationship between Waldo and Lyndall that Schreiner presents her most striking subversion of the gender conventions of her day. Passionate about new possibilities for relationships between men and women, Schreiner expressed her views most fully in *Women and Labour* (1911). In this long essay, she outlines her ideas on the revolutionary New Man, explaining that "the ideal of the typically modern

man departs strongly from that of his forefathers in the direction of finding in woman active companionship and co-operation rather than passive submission" (Schreiner 1998, 105). In many ways, Waldo fits this vision, and his bond with Lyndall shows a possible glimpse of alternative male-female relationships freed from conventional gender roles. After her return from boarding school, in Part 2 of the novel, Lyndall comments to Waldo, during their journey to the Boer wedding, "When I am with you I never know that I am a woman and you are a man; I only know we are both things that think" (197). The main reason why Lyndall does not take note of Waldo's gender is because he does not, as was the conventional male-female dynamic, expect subservience from her, but instead treats her as his equal. He is also able to sympathise with her plight as a woman and encourages her to advocate change to women's limited lives: "But why do you not try to bring that time? … When you speak I believe all you say; other people would listen to you also" (180). In addition, his liberal thinking regarding gender is demonstrated in his letter to her at the end of the novel. He writes:

> When I used to sit on the transport wagon half sleeping, I used to start awake because your hands were on me. In my lodgings, many nights I have blown the light out, and sat in the dark, that I might see your face start out more distinctly… I am very helpless, I shall never do anything; but you will work, and I will take your work for mine. Sometimes such a sudden gladness seizes me when I remember that somewhere in the world you are living and working. You are my very own; nothing else is my own so. (256)

Waldo's statement, "I shall never do anything; but you will work" reflects the important aspect of his characterisation already noted, in which the gender convention of masculine industry is subverted by emphasising his complete lack of ambition or initiative. And not simply subversion, perhaps, but gender *inversion* – for the statement also indicates how in his own liberation from conventional gender stereotyping, he finds it easy to imagine a woman taking on a more active role of working, while he, the

man, concedes his traditional primacy: “but you will work, and I will take your work for mine”.

Waldo also reverses popular ideas regarding male/female roles in his approach to his mechanical inventions, specifically the development of his sheep-shearing machine, which is presented as a form of gestation and motherly devotion. In this regard, Carol Barash comments that Waldo “… twice thinks of his intellectual creations as offspring. They take nine months each to produce, and he feels bereft when they are stolen from him” (1989, 273). His attitude can be seen as subversive because,

> [t]hroughout history, motherhood was described as the woman's basic mission, profession, and an inseparable part of her nature. Women are supposedly drawn into motherhood by their inner instincts which at the same time guarantee their children’s healthy growth and development…. Motherhood was equated with femininity. It was considered the most beautiful and the most natural profession for the woman … (Leskošek 2011, 2)

Waldo’s deviant nature in respect of his “motherly” relationship to his inventions is highlighted by his contrast to Lyndall who seems completely devoid of any maternal feelings. While he says on the subject of children, “It is a marvellous thing that one soul should have power to cause another” (196), Lyndall indicates a powerful aversion to the idea of having children, and the thought of being responsible for another human seems to her a burden: “… I would not like to bring a soul into this world. When it sinned and when it suffered something like a dead hand would fall on me …. If it lived to be eighty it would always hang like a millstone round my neck, have the right to demand good from me, and curse me for its sorrow” (196).

By the end of the novel Waldo realises that Lyndall was correct in her pronouncement that the outside world would have nothing to offer him: “When I had been in the shop three days I wanted to go away again. A clerk in a shop has the lowest work to do of

all people. It is much better to break stones: you have the blue sky above you and only the stones to bend to" (244). After six months, tired of the emptiness of the world of commerce and faced with the realisation that he loves Lyndall, Waldo returns to the farm thinking that he would find her there. His deep attraction to Lyndall should not, perhaps, be seen as a traditional romantic love, since his genderlessness makes this impossible. Rather it should be seen as a spiritual and intellectual connection, which is exactly reciprocated by Lyndall, as her words to him in the intimacy of their wagon-ride to the Boer wedding make clear: "I like you so much, I love you …. When I am with you I never know that I am a woman and you are a man; I only know we are both things that think" (197). For his part, however, Waldo is never able to share his feelings with her. When he finally arrives back at the farm after his long absence, he learns of Lyndall's death from Em. Initially, he is completely distraught at having lost the only person with whom he had ever felt a strong bond. However, with time he is able to find consolation for this loss, which is provided by the source of all the other consolations he has received in the novel: the natural world. That nature has acted as a source of consolation, helping Waldo through difficult times, is supported by his own words: "… a lovely world for all that, and to sit there gloating in the sunlight was perfect. He moved his hands as though he were washing them in the sunshine. There will always be something worth living for while there are shimmery afternoons" (297).

The description of Waldo's last moments, stretched out in the afternoon sun, amongst the farmyard creatures, finally seems to evoke more powerfully than anywhere else in the novel his universal bond with the natural world for which he feels an absolute and reciprocated love:

> The fellow looked, and at last stretched out one hand to a little ice-plant that grew on the sod-wall of the sty; not as though he would have picked it, but as it were in a friendly greeting. He loved it … [Em] put [a cup of

> milk] down upon the ground beside him. The mother hen was at work still among the stones, but the chickens had climbed about him, and were perching on him. One stood upon his shoulder and rubbed its little head softly against his black curls; another tried to balance itself on the very edge of the old felt hat. One tiny fellow stood upon his hand, and tried to crow; another had nestled itself down comfortably on the old coat-sleeve, and gone to sleep there. Em did not drive them away; but she covered his glass softly at his side. 'He will wake soon,' she said, 'and be glad of it'. But the chickens were wiser. (297-300)

Unlike the deaths of Undine and Lyndall, which signify defeat, Waldo's end might be interpreted more positively as a final symbolic "blending" with the natural world. Throughout the novel, it is in nature that Waldo has found a solace from his childhood sufferings, and a substitute for the religion that fails him. What has been argued in the previous pages, however, is that in its organic unity, the natural world also offers him a way of transcending the artificial constructs of gender. Despite the fact that society is as intolerant of Waldo's deviance from conventional gender roles as it is of Lyndall's, he is able to free himself from the expected gender roles of his time while she remains trapped within them. It is because of this entrapment that she describes her life as "[a] striving, and a striving, and an ending in nothing" (84); conversely, Waldo is able to escape the limitations imposed on him by society, through the sense of community and happiness he finds in the natural world. In this way, he demonstrates that despite the gender prescriptions imposed by society, it is possible to find outlets for one's energies and experience fulfilment if one can only free oneself from these prescriptions. Thus, despite the fact that Waldo is not as openly defiant of conventional gender roles as Lyndall, it can be argued that he is the most subversive character in the novel as he is able to escape society's expectations more completely than Lyndall ever is.

Conclusion

Aside from her ground-breaking feminist work, Olive Schreiner was a pioneer in the field of gender studies, identifying the constructed nature thereof more than a century before it was recognised as an area of study in its own right. As demonstrated by this dissertation, her novels *Undine* (1929) and *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) communicate that there is no link between biology and gender thereby revealing the artificial nature of male and female Victorian gender models.

This study has found that Schreiner's thinking about gender roles, male and female, developed significantly over the period that produced first *Undine* and then *The Story of an African Farm*. In the former, Schreiner focussed solely on subverting female gender models that emphasised women's meekness and docility. Yet the challenge to these stereotypes in Undine was relatively tentative and limited; particularly if she is placed alongside Lyndall in the later novel, Undine's rebellion appears somewhat half-hearted and unsustainable. On this point Carolyn Berkman asserts that although "… Undine deviates in many ways from conventional gender expectations, she appears to do so more from temperamental disposition than from principled choice" (1989, 145). Undine's subversion of female gender roles is interrupted by her repeated lapses into more conventional behaviour characterised, specifically by her unalterable belief that at the centre of women's existence, as the sole source of value and purpose, were the personal relationships that required their absolute and self-sacrificing dedication.

It is against this belief that Lyndall's subversion of conventional female gender roles makes a far more resolute and concerted stand. Lyndall does not associate fulfilment with women's subservient devotion to men. Instead, she reimagines romantic relationships between men and women, explaining to Waldo: Only "[w]hen men and

women are equals" (179), and "when love is no more bought or sold" (180) will romantic love be able to thrive (MacDonald 2015, 140). Yet, despite her more liberated outlook in this regard, Lyndall struggles to overcome the idea that in order to be happy one had to live in service – if not of a husband or lover – then of something else. Thus, through her belief that gratification and purpose could only be achieved through service, her liberation from conventional gender norms, like Undine's, also remains incomplete, and a deep disappointment to her.

The inability of both Undine and Lyndall to completely escape their gender roles reveals not their lack of will, but rather the deep-rooted nature of their Victorian gender conditioning. In both novels, we see the extent to which society indoctrinates women to fulfil certain roles and to see these roles as natural. In Lyndall's case, it is the finishing school that attempts to instruct her in correct feminine behaviour, while the men in Undine's life are responsible for her gender training (Berkman 1989, 129). Carol Barash has commented that

> … [Schreiner's] writing attempts to reveal necessary political change but cannot embody those hopes in fiction. However, such narrative limits can also be read as political truths: stories don't change until the social order changes; the act of writing political fiction involves straining against social constructs, enabling them to change (1989, 269-270).

At the time in which Schreiner lived, such change seemed far off, as Lyndall herself makes clear when she with longing envy looks ahead: "if I might be one of those born in the future; then, perhaps, to be born a woman will not be to be born branded" (171). For the women of Schreiner's generation, it must have been almost impossible to imagine such a world, and so it is one of her great achievements that through her art she was able to start picturing what such a fundamental change would involve for those struggling towards it. It is this struggle, and the distress, conflicts, reversals and contradictions it entailed, that she pictured in the lives of her heroines challenging the

society that “branded” them as the prisoners of deeply discriminatory gender constraints.

Yet, as varied and complex as Schreiner’s treatment of female stereotypes is in her characterisations of Undine, Lyndall and Em, it does not represent the full extent of her attempt to reimagine gender roles, and subvert their traditional definitions. For in her treatment of masculine gender models, we find a challenge to deeply entrenched social norms that is not only more daring but, paradoxically perhaps, also more optimistic than in her portrayal of women. While all her other characters fail to completely escape their gender conditioning, Waldo, in *The Story of an African* Farm, succeeds in rejecting masculine gender expectations. He does not simply remodel himself after the female gender, as is the case with Gregory Rose, but manages to transcend the artificiality of Victorian gender binaries through an integration with the all-embracing natural world. The principal reason for the success of Waldo’s attempts to escape restrictive gender roles in contrast to Lyndall’s failure is precisely because he manages to find something to replace conventional gender roles, which gives him the sense of belonging and fulfilment, that she never achieves. Thus, in comparing Lyndall’s and Waldo’s stories, it might be deduced that the greatest challenge for women in finding fulfilment outside conventional gender roles lay not in reforming society’s assumptions regarding gender norms, but in overcoming their own. It is Waldo’s ability to completely ignore society’s gender expectations of him that enables him to find an alternative form of fulfilment. And as an important aspect of this, through his friendship with Lyndall who he treats as an intellectual equal, Waldo offers a “fruitful model for [future] male-female relations” (McDonald 2016, 132).

Unfortunately, it is beyond the limitations of the present study to include in its treatment of gender subversion Schreiner's third, unfinished, novel, *From Man to Man* (1926). After the publication of *The Story of an African Farm*, she spent considerable periods of her life living in England as well as other places in Europe. Here she mixed with many progressive thinkers, such as Eleanor Marx, Havelock Ellis and Karl Pearson (Driver 2015, xvii), whose company, inevitably, had a strong influence on her own thinking. More specifically, she was a member of Karl Pearson's Men's and Women's Club, which discussed topics such as relationships, marriage and friendships between the sexes (Driver 2015, xvii), and also gave advice to sex workers, the detrimental effects of prostitution on society being a subject she felt strongly about.

Schreiner began working on *From Man to Man* in the 1870s while employed as a governess in the Karoo and would spend the remainder of her life writing and revising the novel (Driver 2015, ix). Although *From Man to Man* is generally regarded as the weaker novel (Driver 2015, ix), and as such has received less scholarly attention than *The Story of an African Farm*, Schreiner herself regarded it as the greater achievement of the two works: "I love my new book so … a hundred times better than I ever loved *An African Farm*" (Driver 2015, ix) and as such its importance within her body of work should perhaps be re-evaluated. In *From Man to Man*, Schreiner continued to expose the artificiality of gender distinctions as part of a wider focus on the "intersection of … class, race and gender" (Driver 2015, xiv-xv). Rather than see these dimensions in isolation, as most sociologists continued to do well into the next century (Driver 2015, xv), Schreiner was able to make the connections in a way that showed, again, how ahead of her time she was. Of special interest, in the light of what has been raised in this study, is her treatment in *From Man to Man* of the link between gender distinctions and the parasitic nature of marriage, involving Rebekah and Frank, and Bertie and the

Jew. This issue also appears as one of the central topics of her essay *Women and Labour* (1911), and it would be profitable to explore the relationship between the two works in this respect. Also of potential interest as a possible extension of the present study of Schreiner's subversion of gender is the connection between Rebekah and Lyndall as Schreiner's representations of the "New Woman". Suggestive work has already been done on the topic, which could be further developed. Carolyn Berkman, for example, has pointed out that, "[i]n certain respects, Lyndall is a more feminist rebel against gender norms than Rebekah, who in her unhappy marriage is an uncertain model for the new woman," (Berkman 1989, 145); however, despite Rebekah's conventional attitude to limited female gender roles of wife and mother, she has an "intellectual dedication beyond Lyndall's scope" (Berkman 1989, 147). She also acts as her own saviour when things become hopeless, while Lyndall seems incapable of finding any way out of her predicament. And as another extension of the present examination of Schreiner's multiple focus on gender subversion, more detailed attention might be given to the characterisation of Mr Drummond in *From Man to Man*, who deviates from expected male gender conventions, as Berkman has noted. "… Schreiner's vision of the new man", she has asserted, "was one of the most original and subversive features of her social thought" (Berkman 1989,142), and it is this, somewhat overlooked, feature that the present work has attempted to open up in a way that could lead to a wider exploration.

Furthermore, Schreiner's treatment of gender might be investigated in her colonial novella *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897) as well as her allegorical short stories. Schreiner wrote *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* as a critique of Cecil John Rhodes's involvement in Mashonaland and Matabeleland. Described by Tara MacDonald as "…an important example of how Schreiner worked consistently to

redefine masculine models in her literature…" (2015, 150), it might give important insight into Schreiner's conception of the New Man, and more generally, developments in her handling of gender since her earliest efforts, in the novels discussed in this study.

In the period after her publication of *The Story of an African Farm* and before *Women and Labour*, Schreiner wrote short allegories, published as two anthologies *Dreams* (1890) and *Dream Life and Real Life* (1893) and a third, posthumously, as *Stories, Dreams and Allegories* (1923). Schreiner's short stories gave her the opportunity to develop her creative technique, since many of the key ideas found in her novels such as her conception of the New Woman, gender, sex parasitism and relationships between men and woman are also found in her short stories. Thus, although Schreiner's short stories have often been dismissed as "sentimental" (Barsby 1995, 31), study of them would provide greater understanding of the development of the ideas mentioned above from her earlier fiction.

Taking a holistic view of Schreiner's work, both her writings and the different causes she was involved in, Vera Brittain paid tribute to her as "one of the most remarkable pioneers produced by the nineteenth century" (Bishop 1983, 80). This pioneering spirit took different forms, most notably the sheer act of turning into serious fiction of lasting power the experiences of nineteenth-century South Africans in a way that had not been attempted before. As this study has tried to show, one part of this pioneering art was Schreiner's attempt to engage, specifically, with the experience of gender, portrayed through her characters both female and male who are shown confronting the strains and constraints of the rigidly conventional roles forced upon them. As has been argued in the foregoing pages, Schreiner anticipated by almost a century what

have become the widely accepted assumptions underlying our own thinking about gender. To some extent, it is possible to see in her attempts to picture individuals freeing themselves from the traditional binaries of gender the earliest steps in the process that has led to current views of gender fluidity. It is here, as strikingly as anywhere else in her work, that her pioneering role can be seen, almost as an enactment of her own image of the pioneer in the allegory of Waldo's Stranger, in *The Story of an African Farm*. Near the end of his search for the great bird of truth, the hunter describes the upward path that he has built for future generations: "By the steps that I have cut they will climb; by the stairs that I have built they will mount. They will never know the name of the man who made them. At the clumsy work they will laugh…. But they will mount, and on *my* work; they will climb …." (149). It is at least partly by the steps laid down in the works of Olive Schreiner that we have arrived at the better understanding of, and more liberated, more humane attitude to gender identity that prevails today.

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