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MIRROR, MIRROR: A PSYCHOANALYTICAL INTERPRETATION OF OLIVE SCHREINER'S NEW WOMAN

By Angela Chui, *Arcadia University*

Olive Schreiner situates *The Story of an African Farm* in a fractured world comprised of drought-stricken earth, splintering religion, inaccessible education, and shattered familial units. Within an existentialist backdrop, Schreiner immediately foregrounds her protagonist's pursuit of meaningfulness through a concept of universal interconnectedness. Even as a child, Lyndall keenly perceives the inherent flaws of the broken society in which she lives; and her childhood experiences on the farmstead define her revolutionary identity as the Victorian New Woman. Lyndall's physical and intellectual maturation can be examined through the psychoanalytical lens of Jacques Lacan's pivotal essay, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function." Although Lacan's theory chronicles the development of an infant's psyche, a symbolic interpretation renders it applicable to Lyndall, the embryonic New Woman, whose growth represents humankind's next step on the evolutionary ladder. In accordance with Lacan's theory, young Lyndall learns to recognize her unique identity within her fragmented society as she begins her quest for a valuable sense of wholeness. Lyndall's trailblazing convictions and desire for an innate and transcendent sameness in all living things take root in the formative stage of her childhood and allow her to challenge social injustice as an adult. For Lyndall, childhood is not merely a time of physical maturation; it also serves as a symbolic period of spiritual and evolutionary growth that defines her progressive crusade as the New Woman.

The influence of the mirror stage and the concept of the "ideal-I," or imago, manifest in Lyndall's fascination with her specular image and the fierce magnificence of her reflected eyes. According to Lacan, it is through the examination of the duplicate, specular-self that a child comes to interpret one's "own body, and the persons and even things around him."¹ A child identifies how it understands itself and its environment through this process. One establishes imago, or an idealized understanding of oneself as seemingly autonomous and whole, by studying the specular-self. For Lyndall, the struggling New Woman, the mirror reflects her ultimate goal: a brilliant vision of a female that is fully independent, empowered, and unrestrained by the social and gender restrictions that cage many Victorian women. Even as a child, Lyndall recognizes the injustice of her social environment, but in her ideal-I she finds the will to resist. Lyndall's mirror-model of autonomous femininity manifests at an early age and bolsters her rebellious will when it falters. The eyes of her specular-self "had looked at her ever since she could remember, when it was but a small child's face over a blue pinafore."² As she gazes into a handheld mirror, she tells herself, "We are not afraid, you and I; we are together; we will fight, you and I."³ Lyndall's childhood glimpse of unfettered femininity continues to burn brightly within her as she fights to establish human equality and unity.

Lyndall privileges knowledge as the chief source of self-fulfillment and the agent of change capable of transforming her specular image into reality. The young Lyndall tells Em, her cousin, "There is nothing helps in this world...but to be very wise, and to know everything—to be clever...When I am grown up...there will be nothing that I do not know."⁴ Lyndall longs to leave the stifling farm and embark upon a regime of rigorous study; she keenly feels the stinging helplessness of "the barb in the arrow of childhood's suffering...its intense ignorance."⁵ Knowledge attained through education and experience constitutes a valuable component of both

¹ Jacques Lacan, *Ecritus: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 2002), 3.

² Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 210.

³ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

Lacan's formation of self and Lyndall's ethos. Lacan notes that comprehension of language shapes function and identity when one transcends the developmental orders. He writes, "The sufferings of neurosis and psychosis provide us schooling in the passions of the soul."⁶ Lyndall discovers that books, while certainly effective educational tools, "do not tell everything"⁷ and cannot always illuminate the "passions of the soul." Psychological and spiritual stimulations constitute immersive experiences that can also yield great knowledge. Lyndall appreciates academia, but she also asserts, "I like experience, I like to try."⁸ From childhood to adulthood, Lyndall finds value in both the esoteric and the everyday. Indeed, when Lyndall does finally enroll in finishing school, it fails to satisfy her hunger, so she crafts her own curriculum by fusing both methods of attaining knowledge. She says, "I bought books and newspapers, and at night I sat up. I read, and epitomized what I read; and I found time to write some plays...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."⁹ Lyndall nurtures her imago by seeking valuable literature, thinking critically, and exercising her soul with artistic endeavors and valuable encounters with other worldviews and modes of living. Robin Hackett writes, the New Woman "passionately sought education" and describes the youthful Lyndall as a figure of burgeoning strength, independence, and defiance.¹⁰ Lyndall's expanding education fuels her assumption of the ideal-I; knowledge contributes to her self-actualization and bestows nuance upon her journey toward social revolution.

Although Lyndall believes that education can enable social change and inspire women to seek self-actualization, such radical vicissitudes cannot be accomplished by one person alone, no matter how dedicated. Both Schreiner's novel and Lacan's theory recognize an innate desire for belonging and interconnectedness among all living things. Lacan's notion of "homeomorphic identification" posits that an identification with a larger whole is essential, not only for humans, but for all beings, from pigeons to locusts.¹¹ However, Lacan reveals that the completeness a child feels when he or she believes himself or herself to be inextricable from the mirror-self is false and fleeting. The child must then seek a shadow of the oneness they felt when united with their mirror-self; this new oneness found by abandoning the "specular-I" and "turn[ing] into the social-I."¹² As a young girl, Lyndall adheres to Lacan's principles of "gestalt" and "total body," the period during which the child believes it is one with its potent mirror-image, or, in Lyndall's case, that her ideal-I is at least attainable. Dominant culture, as represented by self-serving Blenkins or materialistic Tant' Sannie, threaten Lyndall's vision of the empowered feminine. However, Lyndall meets such hurdles with vows such as, "When...I am strong, I will hate everything that has power, and help everything that is weak," and "We will not be children always; we shall have power too, some day."¹³ The reflection of her idealized self tells her, "I am not afraid of the world—I will fight the world."¹⁴ Youthful Lyndall's comments echo her imago's assurance that she can overcome any adversary with no ally but herself.

Lyndall's rejection of social conventions contradicts Lacan's assertion that culture demonstrates "a utilitarian function" for those who have entered the symbolic order. In other words, society endows such individuals with

⁶ Lacan, *Ecritus*, 4.

⁷ Schreiner, *African Farm*, 14.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁰ Robin Hackett, *Sapphic Primitivism: Productions of Race, Class, and Sexuality in Key Works of Modern Fiction*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 41.

¹¹ Lacan, *Ecritus*, 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7.

¹³ Schreiner, *African Farm*, 60, 94.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 247.

a sense of belonging after the “authentic” wholeness of infancy has been stripped away.¹⁵ Lyndall encounters a predicament at this phase of symbolic development. Her society fails to mete out the greatest good to the greatest number; it privileges a select few—namely the white, wealthy, European patriarchs—and women have no significant place within this patrimonial structure. In fact, strict gender roles make female “souls so compressed that they would have fitted into a small thimble, and found room to move there—wide room.”¹⁶ Lyndall’s mimetic-self, the vision of unshackled womanhood, contradicts every ideology championed by her society. Lyndall’s ever-broadening education, both academic and empirical, leads her to the bleak revelation that her longed-for power remains unattainable. At this stage, she faces Lacan’s concept of the “fragmented body,” or the recognition of the irreconcilable division between the specular and real selves. Lyndall simply has not been born in a time period that permits female actualization, equality, and access. As a young adult, she fittingly relates the subjugation of women to a hideously disfigured body. She states, “the parts we are not to use have been quite atrophied, and have even dropped off...we wear the bandages, but our limbs have not grown to them.”¹⁷ Conforming to such a culture that pigeonholes women would be corrosive to Lyndall and her New Womanhood. Therefore, she is forced to forge her own version of wholeness, even as cultural norms and institutions press in on her and her goals appear increasingly more divergent from reality.

Lyndall’s adult education exposes her to the bitter realities of nineteenth century womanhood and forces her to reexamine her ability to transform her childhood ideal into reality. During her finishing school tenure, she witnesses firsthand “how little space a human soul can be crushed.”¹⁸ Women, Lyndall discovers, “have power; and since we are not to expend it in tunneling mountains, nor healing diseases, not making laws, nor money, not on any extraneous object, we expend it on [men].”¹⁹ Instead of enjoying the performance of meaningful work, nineteenth-century norms permit women to employ themselves solely by amusing and attracting men. Christine Haskill writes, “Lyndall demonstrates the frustration of a woman who cannot find a suitable outlet for her passions, ambitions, and talents—who cannot find new forms of work. Lyndall discovers that woman’s only power, only sphere of work, is as a lover, wife, or mother.”²⁰ Lyndall’s revelations leave her horrified and heartsick, and as she contemplates the work required to stimulate gender reform, “over [her]small face came the weary look.”²¹ Lyndall’s reaction serves as a painful expression of Lacan’s fragmented body concept. Not only is she mentally and emotionally exhausted from her fight against the dominion of the patriarchy, the word “small” emphasizes the vastness of her lonely endeavor. For the first time, Lyndall doubts her ability to bring her specular-inspired aspirations of feminine equality and access into fruition.

Lyndall’s period of formal education inspires her to reevaluate her notion of spiritual and social wholeness. Ruth Knechtel acknowledges that Lyndall does not actively contemplate Waldo’s new-transcendentalist ethos of the Universal Whole; instead, Lyndall espouses her own perception of “oneness” through a shared notion of human “sameness.”²² According to Lacan, “The very normalization of...maturation is henceforth dependent in man on cultural intervention.”²³ However, Lyndall’s culture severely undermines women through such institutions

¹⁵ Lacan, *Ecritus*, 8.

¹⁶ Schreiner, *African Farm*, 152.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 158.

²⁰ Christine Haskill. “Valuable Failure as a Unifying Principle in The Story of an African Farm,” *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920*. Vol. 57, No.1. (Literature Reference Center, 2014), 90.

²¹ Schreiner, *African Farm*, 162.

²² Knechtel, Ruth. “Olive Schreiner’s Pagan Animism: An Underlying Unity,” *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* Vol. 53, No. 3. (Literature Reference Center, 2010), 260.

²³ Lacan, *Ecritus*, 7.

as marriage, the cult of domesticity, and “finishing” schools. She espouses the notion that true human interconnectedness cannot exist unless gender binaries and boundaries are eradicated. Lyndall’s quest for social reform now requires her to “[break] down the narrow walls that hold me in.”²⁴ Lyndall further explains to the attentive Waldo, “We all enter the world little plastic beings...and the world tells us what we are to be, and shapes us by the ends it sets before us. To you it says—Work; and to us it says—Seem!”²⁵ Lyndall keenly observes that both sexes are born with the same authentic potential and without the fabricated, socially-defined distinctions later forced upon them. Yet, men are encouraged to actively flourish and mold the world while female growth is viciously pruned. Lyndall remarks upon the innate sameness shared between male and female that exists outside of the influences of enforced social customs. She states, “We were equals once when we lay new-born babes on our nurse’s knees. We will be equals again when they tie up our jaws for the last sleep.”²⁶ The manifesto that Lyndall shares with Waldo establishes her doctrine of equality. Lyndall did not yet grasp the damaging extent of gender roles when she crafted her imago in childhood. As an adult, she recognizes that women must seek autonomy *and* that society must be forced to change in order to grant women the room to spiritually and intellectually expand their inner lives.

While Lyndall’s dual value of individuality and oneness seem contradictory, in actuality, they coincide. In order to benefit and participate in the universal whole of humanity, one must be able to maintain personal awareness and think critically for oneself. Knechtel writes, “Just as the branches of blood vessels in the gander are repeated in the share and outline of the thorn tree...so too are all human beings connected in such a way that should elide traditional dualisms such as gender used by those who preach inequality.”²⁷ For Lyndall, neither wholeness nor personal identification can be found by conforming to the corrupt society around her; instead, Lyndall must continue working to realize her ideal, which now includes the natural equality of humanity, in hopes that a day will come when “to be a born a woman is not to be born branded.”²⁸

The institutions of motherhood and marriage, in particular, jeopardize Lyndall’s pursuit of her goals and threaten to eradicate her identity. Lyndall explains, “Marriage for love is the beautifullest external symbol of the union of souls; marriage without it is the uncleanliest traffic that defiles the world.”²⁹ Marriage does not appeal to Lyndall; she does not share the same values of her “utilitarian” and “normalizing” culture. She announces, “I am not in so great a hurry to put my neck beneath any man’s foot; and I do not greatly admire the crying of babies...There are other women glad of such work.”³⁰ According to Lyndall, the work of domesticity and maternity is unsuitable work for some women, and such tasks should not be required of those who wish otherwise. Lyndall, despite her personal proclivities, does not reject the institution of marriage itself, so long as the nuptials are based in love between equal partners. Such marriages, however, seem virtually nonexistent in her society; the lack of perfect unions is demonstrated by Lyndall’s stranger, the unnamed father of her baby. Since he is unnamed, he can serve as a proxy for any and every man. Wedding the stranger would mean she would be “tied,” “held fast,” or “mastered” by a man in a conventional nineteenth-century marriage. The stranger demands that Lyndall become his “little wife” and “give yourself entirely to me.”³¹

²⁴ Schreiner, *African Farm*, 182.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

²⁷ Knechtel, “Pagan Animism,” 264.

²⁸ Schreiner, *African Farm*, 154

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 156.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 150.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 206.

Every facet of Lyndall's long-cherished imago—her dream of feminine autonomy, access, equality, and human oneness—would irreparably shatter if she sacrificed her whole being to the stranger. Therefore, Lyndall “rebels against the conventions of proper [Victorian] femininity by refusing to marry the man who is the father of her child. She expresses her sexuality, but will not be forced by convention to marry without love.”³² Yet, although she refuses to marry, the relationship indirectly undermines Lyndall through the birth of their child. Her feelings for her daughter are polluted for two reasons: the union between Lyndall and the stranger is an imperfect one, and Lyndall did not choose motherhood. Lyndall tellingly says, “I did not love it; its father was not my prince; I did not care for it; but it was so little.”³³ Her domineering and misogynistic stranger is certainly not a compassionate prince who would support Lyndall's proto-feminist message. Further, she dehumanizes her daughter by referring to the infant as “it.” She does ask Gregory Rose to cover the baby's grave and writes in the aborted letter to the stranger, “I will always love you for the sake of what lay by me those three hours,” but her inability to consider the infant a human and not an “it” suggests she has difficulty accepting the offspring of a union in which the man feels he must “rule” the woman.³⁴ The inequality between genders ruptures Lyndall's desire for oneness, both her larger vision of universal human interrelation and the smaller connectedness of the family unit.

Ultimately, the forced domesticity that results from Lyndall's unplanned maternity leads to her defeat. Her illness and immobility, compounded by the emotional strain of her unwanted maternity, render her incapable of continuing to wage her battle against the norms of society. Bedridden and weakened from her excruciating labor, Lyndall's physical decay forces her into the role of a helpless and passive trope of femininity. Her mind sinks into a lethargic fog and her body grows weak and swollen with a lack of exercise, echoing her earlier comparison to the atrophied body of the female trapped in the domestic sphere. Only with the help of Gregory Rose, the Englishman hired to farm Tant' Sannie's land who disguises himself as a female nurse, is Lyndall capable of escaping the stifling environment of the stranger's house and rally her warrior spirit for the final time. Looking glass in hand, she derives great motivation, strength, and comfort from her mirror-image during the few remaining minutes of her life. When Lyndall is freed from the fetters of patriarchy, including her forced domesticity and the presence of the oppressive stranger, “The old clear intellect awoke from its long torpor... The old strong soul gathered itself together for the last time,” and “The soul, clear and unclouded, looked forth” from the mirror.³⁵ Social institutions and gender roles can no longer apply to her. Reality and mirror selves blur for Lyndall as she hovers on the edge of death, and she reclaims a vestige of her empowering gestalt-imago. She says, “We are not afraid, you and I; we are together. We will fight, you and I.”³⁶ For a brief moment, as she presses her stiffening fingers against the glass and symbolically unites with her ideal-I, Lyndall is once again whole. Death comes peacefully, and her face shines with “beauty and tranquility.”³⁷ In her final moments, Lyndall's real and mirror selves fuse, and she once again believes herself capable of accomplishing any goal and trusts that her lonely labor will bear fruit.

One could argue that Lyndall's death results from her inability to fully separate herself from her childhood ideal-I and her refusal to move smoothly through the developmental orders and integrate herself within society. However, Lyndall's death can be understood more fully in conjunction with the allegory of the hunter, the tale a wandering man interprets from Waldo's etching. Lyndall and her evolutionary counterpart, Waldo, perish, but Tant' Sannie's unhealthy girth and her “pudding-faced, weak-eyed child” suggest that the line of her materialistic

³² Hackett, *Sapphic Primitivism*, 59.

³³ Schreiner, *African Farm*, 246.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 252.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 252.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 253.

society can continue no further, either.³⁸ Like the hunter, Lyndall “strives to embark on a path toward freedom and equality, but she struggles....Lyndall’s valuable failure offers readers the possibility to attend to her call for feminist strength and the work for equality, even if she fails to achieve those goals herself.”³⁹ Lyndall’s fight against the world results in a bittersweet ending; in death, Lyndall’s mission lives on, and she helps plant the possibility for a better tomorrow in her cousin Em and Gregory Rose. By the novel’s conclusion, both Em and Gregory Rose are transformed into nurturers who support their loved ones unconditionally, even when those loved ones harbor radical and revolutionary principles. Gregory Rose, who once vowed, “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,” learns gentleness and compassion from his tenure as Lyndall’s nurse.⁴⁰ His name, a hybrid between the masculine “Gregory” and more feminine “Rose,” suggest a possibility for balance between the extremes of Victorian concepts of masculinity and femininity. Similarly, Em radiates goodness; she accepts and adores both Waldo and Lyndall regardless of their radical views, and even serves her loved ones milk, a universal symbol of maternal care. Em and Gregory Rose are not great thinkers or activists like Lyndall, but their impending marriage and potential progeny harbor the seeds of hope. Together, Em and Gregory Rose can create a more accepting and nourishing climate for the new generation of New Women and Men.

A psychoanalytical evaluation of Lyndall grants insight into her brilliant psyche and her methods as she journeys down the thorny path of New Womanhood. Her childhood development in the mirror-stage allows her to define her understanding of herself, the aspirations she seeks to achieve throughout her lifetime, and her vision of women’s evolutionary future. Lyndall fiercely strives to bring her goal of female social, intellectual, and spiritual advancement into being, but the advancement of humankind does not occur overnight and requires great sacrifice. The allegorical hunter realizes, “Where I lie down worn out other men will stand, young and fresh.... They will never know the name of the man who made them....But they will mount, and on my work; they will climb, and by my stair....My soul hears their glad step coming.”⁴¹ Just as the hunter must die in order to secure a path for future seekers of truth, Lyndall is unable to realize her ideals and crush the strictures that bind Victorian women in her own lifetime. However, she does not fail in her work. Lyndall successfully crafts a stair for a future New Woman, one who possesses a defiant spirit and a daring dream, to climb.

³⁸ Ibid., 262.

³⁹ Haskill, “Valuable Failure,” 89.

⁴⁰ Schreiner, *African Farm*, 174.

⁴¹ Ibid., 133.

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