‘Stories, or “someone telling something to someone about something”: Two stories in Olive Schreiner’s letters & one in Nella Last’s Mass-Observation diary’


I. a story is part of ‘a situation’

II. a story must make a point or achieve a coup

III. the achievement of its coup stands for the story itself

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Presentation Overview

Sketch out the broad structure of stories in Schreiner’s extant letters

Present a brief analysis of examples of stories in the letters

Consider how stories in Nella Last’s M-O diary compare

Mary Brown (4 stories in 45 extant letters)
Edward Carpenter (5 in 127)
S. Cronwright-Schreiner (5 in 10)
Patrick Duncan (1 in 3)
Charley Earp (1 in 2)
Havelock Ellis (15 in 397)
Alice Greene (9 in 129)
Wynnie Hemming (1 in 33)
Emily Hobhouse (1 in 8)
John Hodgson (1 in 100)
Ray Lankester (2 in 1)
J. T. Lloyd (2 in 2)
Betty Molteno (3 in 458)
Bob Muirhead (3 in 37)
Caroline Murray (1 in 76)
Miemie Murray (1 in 73)
May Murray Parker (2 in 40)

Karl Pearson (3 in 134)
F. Pethick Lawrence (2 in 41)
Anna Purcell (1 in 18)
Jessie Rose-Innes (1 in 31)
Mary Sauer (1 in 133)
Fan Schreiner (4 in 273)
Rebecca Schreiner (1 in 9)
Will Schreiner (13 in 440)
Isie Smuts (1 in 96)
Jan Smuts (1 in 26)
E. Stakesby Lewis (6 in 122)
Daily News (2 in 2)

Overall = c.90 stories in letters written to 30 of the c.120 addressees of Schreiner’s 5000+ extant letters.
Schreiner did not write stories in her letters to...

Ruth Alexander
Allen & Unwin
Wilson Barrett
Miss Battie
Alice Clark
Elisabeth Cobb
Harriet Colenso
Sophie Colenso
Daniel C. Boonzaier
Arthur Brown
John Brown
Julie Brown
Frederic Chapman
G. W. Cross
Mrs C C de Villiers
Winifred de Villiers
Mollie Dick
Emilia Frances Dilke
William Dirks
Mary Drew
Emma Earp
Edith Ellis (Lees)
Bessie Findlay
Hudson Findlay
John Findlay
Katie Findlay
T Fisher Unwin
Ethel Friedlander
Mohanandas Gandhi
Richard Garnett
Harry Gie
Mrs Goosen
Aimye Graham
Frank Harris
Alice Hemming
Effie Hemming
Robert Hemming
James Henderson
Joan Hodgson
Jan Hendrick Hofmeyr
Aletta Jacobs
Hermann Kallenbach
Philip Kent
Horatio Kitchener
Vernon Lee
E.S. Lewis
Librarian, London Inst.
E. Bertram Lloyd
Margaret McNaughton
John Mackenzie
F.S. Malan
Catherine Marshall
Alf Mattison
J. X. Merriman
Lucy Molteno
Dorothy Von Moltke
Haldane Murray
Bobby Murray
Cyril Newton Thompson
Henry Norman
Robert Parker
Alys Pearsall Smith
Emmeline Pethick
Lawrence
Frank Podmore
Dollie Radford
James Rose-Innes
Ernest Rhys
Bertrand Russell
Little, Brown & Co.

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Five structural dimensions of Schreiner’s epistolary story-telling

1. various ‘situations’ & ‘occasionings’ of Schreiner’s stories around:
   • particular real world contexts; the letter; the epistolary exchange

2. the degrees to which the coup or coups of her stories are:
   • explicit / obvious; implicit ; &, if any, the kind of subterfuge involved

3. the kind of action the story performs to make its coup:
   • e.g. whether it entertains, challenges, etc.

4. the kinds of coup her stories actually make

5. the different kinds of time utilisations or ‘punctual acts of memory’ involved in Schreiner’s story-telling

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‘…When I was living in England I once gave a little nephew of mine a large four bladed clasp knife. When I next went down to Eastbourne I found he in terrible disgrace. He had cut the benches in the hot-house, & chipped the window set of his bedroom, & actually cut his name in some furniture. When I began to sermonize him, her drew himself up in a very aggrieved way, & said, "Well but, Auntie, you gave it me!"

**Moral:** don’t give sharp knives to little boys who can have nothing but evil to do with them! …’

OS to *Patrick Duncan*, 27 June 1912,
UCT; OSLP Transcription

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‘...you’ve written. Someday I'll send you *I am an artist*. It wouldn’t do to print.

It’s an artist lying by himself on the rocks here in the sun, & all the thing is just talking out his thoughts in the first person. How he loves a woman first sexually, & how he’s tempted to sacrifice his higher spiritual life for her, & how he breaks free from her love when she isn’t true to him: & then after years he meets a woman whom he only calls “my little white face” who is very delicate, dying almost of consumption, & how he loves her & worships her for her genius, wants nothing from her not even a kiss, only feels that if she hadn’t her mother he would take care of her. She wakes up all his old art power all his higher life, all that seemed slipped from him forever.

Then once he hears her talking, & she says to the person who is with her that he loves her, talks as though it were the common feeling that exists between men & women. Then she & the other person go away among the trees. He never wants to see her again. And when As he lies there in the sun he laughs to himself & plans his work his great picture that has lain in his heart for years, & that only she has given him strength to finish. He laughs to himself he has got all he wants of her. And then he plans how perhaps he will marry & have children. And he gets more drowsy lying there in the sun. And there’s a description of Clarens mixed with it all. *Can you see how it goes!*…’

OS to *Havelock Ellis*, 13 February 1887,
HRC, University of Texas at Austin; OSLP Transcription

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‘... & never leaves them; but he is so gentle he never bites any one. I must tell you something which happened the other day. I have only had two visitors since I came back from Cape Town, the one was the Dutch Church Parson, Fouché who called for the first time since he was here. He was very properly dressed in a long black coat & a white tie, he was sitting at the table drinking a cup of tea, when In-bred-sin, who is not accustomed to see strangers in the house, rushed out of his box in the corner where he was with the little ones & made an attack on him trying to bite at his trousers, with his little tail in the air & all the hairs standing out. Then Tommy & Arriet jumped out of the box & began prancing about ^too^, you know they way they do, not trying to bit him, but just showing off. The Parson jumped up from his chair & began springing from one leg to the other, he’s a very big stout young man, as In-bred darted at him. I to make matters better caught up a news paper & shook it at In-bred to make him go back into the box. This put him so beside him self that he rushed under my dress & caught me in the ankle. I gave a scream & a bound & jumped onto the middle of the dining room table, when I looked round Fouche was dashing around with his coat tails flying & In-bred-sin after him. I laughed so much at first I couldn’t get off the table, but at last I got down & drove them all off to their box, but I don’t think the poor young parson will come here again for a long time! You have to forgive In-bred, because of his pass passionate devotion to the little ones. …’

OS to Alice Greene, 14 October 1904, UCT; OSLP Transcription

‘...I sat & saw my ‘picture in the fire’ of other Nov. 5th. days when 6d. pieces were a lot to spend for the boys & bought lots of Chinese matches of green & red & then later some things they called Scouts torches which went off in lovely sparks & were held in the hand.

Last year I said I could not afford a party of any kind on the 5th as I had paid a Dr. Bill which left me flat broke. All the boys pals were what they called Scouts torches which went off in lovely sparks & were held in the hand.

I lost sight of most of the young things for most of them were only jolly acquaintances but Cliff told me two of the Cambridge boys who were waiting for school master posts went to Australia into banks so they will be out of this hell broth war. ...’

Nella Last, 5 November 1939; Transcription from ms. Mass-Observation Diary, 2005
Thank You!

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5000+ letters go live
January 2012!

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