

A Response to Myrtle Hooper's "Textual Surprise in Pauline Smith's 'The Sinner'"*

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Myrtle Hooper's study of "The Sinner" in the 2004-2005 issue of *Connotations* is one of five subtle and nuanced readings she has published of Pauline Smith's South African story collection *The Little Karoo* (1925, 1930) and her novel *The Beadle* (1926).¹ Concentrating on individual stories and the multiple meanings of individual words, Hooper's method is to delineate how small details of action and interaction explode into unexpected significance as the narratives unfold. For Hooper, Smith's strength lies in the way she renders extreme situations in understated, and therefore multivalent, words that arouse pity and terror. Smith's language challenges readers to make moral choices while rendering those choices difficult and unsatisfying. These are not the "sketches of Karoo life" promised by Arnold Bennett in his 1925 introduction,² but prismatic explorations of the human condition. A Smith story is recursive, "progressively revealing layers of hidden relationship that recast and reconfigure the meaning of its action" ("Surprise" 70). Dialogue is crucial, because it propels the "dynamics of narrative engagement and narrative distance that enables her to play with our reading expectations" (69). Focusing on details such as modal verbs and the distinctions between "declarative, ascriptive and relational naming" (71), Hooper registers an almost Jamesian level of implication in Smith's language.

Hooper's insights into Smith's Afrikaans inflected English place her among a group of South African critics whose sensitivity to crosscurrents of meaning in a multilingual society results in innovative and

*Reference: Myrtle Hooper, "Textual Surprise in Pauline Smith's 'The Sinner'," *Connotations* 14.1-3 (2004/2005): 68-86.

appropriately technical explorations of the country's canonical texts.³ However, Hooper goes beyond some of her peers in the way she presses a complex analysis of Smith's language into an exploration of the ethical dilemmas expressed in narrative structure. Hooper shows how Smith's stories unfold as moral wagers with ever higher stakes. They are "epistemologically loaded" ("Surprise" 70), not just for her characters but for readers as well. "Smith's stance in relation to her characters confers on us readers an ethical responsibility: to be receptive; to recognise ourselves in her creatures; to register the implications of their actions, their relations, their insights for ourselves" (86).

Hooper offers a more complex view of the moral issues in Smith's stories than was expressed in the wave of criticism that followed her death in 1959. For instance, Geoffrey Haresnape's 1969 study says of the "The Sinner": "the intention of this story is to show how Niklaas comes to learn resignation and to realize that he is in no position to judge others."⁴ Hooper, unlike Haresnape, does not emphasize linear progress from ignorance to enlightenment. Instead, she illuminates a "modality that reflects possibilities, probabilities, consequences of actions, choices and decisions" ("Surprise" 70). The story is not about "learning" in the conventional sense, but rather about "surprise," which Hooper defines as simultaneously "knowing and not knowing things about oneself and about others" (70). Her central insight, that "The Sinner" concerns itself not with a specific set of beliefs but with the "modulation of knowledge" (70), implicitly sets Smith in a modernist context, with Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* rather than Aesop's *Tales*.

Hooper's interest in the trace elements of moral psychology extends into a more interior account of religion in Smith's stories than is often given. All her readers have noted her extensive use of free indirect narrative. As *The Nation* put it in a 1925 review, "She never intrudes, never even enters a room where a character lies sleeping."⁵ This indirection means that critics have had trouble disengaging the religiosity of the characters from the beliefs of the author. Smith's characters often articulate their emotions by appealing to God or to episodes in

the Bible. "The Sinner" can be viewed as a test-case exploration of this habit, since the part of the narrative that focuses on Niklaas, the sinner-in-chief, consists of alternating bands of action and religious reflection. No thought or feeling passes through Niklaas's mind without his reaching for a biblical source. What critics have had trouble deciding is whether the religious framework is primary or secondary. Is Smith's focus on the continuity between Afrikaner settlement and Old Testament narrative or is she mainly concerned with the reception of that narrative in the turn of the century rural Cape?

One implication of Hooper's essays is that religion affects Smith's characters in unpredictable ways, like a third person joining a private conversation. This emphasis on volatility and surprise challenges J. M. Coetzee's political interpretation of Smith's *oeuvre*. Coetzee argues that by infusing her stories of Afrikaner settlement with the rhythms of the King James Bible, Smith reinforced the ideology of separation that culminated in apartheid.⁶ Coetzee discusses religion less at the level of interpersonal dynamics than as a byproduct of narrative tone, where it serves, he thinks, as a dignifying and stabilizing force. Instead of the skeptical and paradoxical moralist proposed by Hooper, Coetzee's Smith paints an idealized portrait of Afrikaner struggle and Afrikaner "specialness."

Hooper cites Smith's "craftsmanship" as the reason why "I find myself disagreeing with the received reading that her work mythologises—and endorses—an ideology of Afrikaner-as-Israelite" (69). And indeed, a version of this reading goes back a long way. Smith's friend and fellow writer Sarah Gertrude Millin quipped that "When I write about poor whites you know they are poor whites—When *Pauline* writes about them you *think* they are saints!"⁷ I am not sure that Hooper's appeal to craftsmanship or her framing of this debate in terms of "classical tragedy" (69) completely deflects Coetzee's attack. At the very least, it might be wise to acknowledge that Smith's artistry battles with her nostalgia. The temptation to defend Afrikaner religious practices rather than anatomize them grows stronger in *The Beadle* (1926), and dooms the sentimental fragment "Winter Sacra-

ment," a paean to rural life and religiosity that she worked on throughout her life but could never finish.⁸

The more interesting and experimental feature of *The Little Karoo* is Smith's use of what David Ker's study of African modernist fiction calls "the dramatized perspective." Small, incremental scenes "composed of the conflicting attitudes of the protagonists,"⁹ repeated with seemingly minor variations gradually expose larger issues of moral integrity and choice. Smith's characters, who often appear in pairs, do not just oppose but also interpret each other, usually with disastrous results. Truth is sliced and spectral. As in Henry James, the past is haunted as well as idealized. All these features appear in "The Sinner," which contrasts two illicit love affairs in an idyllic upland district called the Kombuis. The first occurred in the distant past and involved the landowner Andries van Reenen and the sinner's wife Toontje, who at that time was the daughter of van Reenen's tenant. The second takes place in the present and involves Niklaas and the rather brash woman who persuades him to leave his wife in her company.

Hooper asserts that Toontje's affair in the Kombuis "carries enduring memories both for her and for van Reenen. The fact that Niklaas goes 'up to the Kombuis' is therefore a narrative reiteration. But the experience he has of the Kombuis is a tawdry business compared to the romantic, elegiac past of Toontje and van Reenen" ("Surprise" 80). I think this comment is too idealistic. The narrator does for a moment wrap the past in an elegiac bubble: "In her youth in the Kombuis this tall patient woman, so quiet in her speech, so controlled in all her movements, had been free and beautiful to [van Reenen] as a roe-buck in the mountains." Yet the fine moment is immediately blown away. "But he did not now remember it and saw in her only the bearer of news about that last passion of his life, his tobacco" (73). The point of view is van Reenen's. It is deeply unreliable and unstable, colored not just by the road not taken in his youth but by the hard taskmaster he has spent many years practicing to perfect.

“But he did not now remember it”: the narrator does not lean too hard on the landowner’s finer feelings, and neither perhaps should we. For to see a hard contrast here is to argue that Smith privileges a quintessentially patriarchal relationship over the entrepreneurial (and female led) liaison engineered by sexual freelancer Jacoba Nooi. Smith invites the reader to idealize, but stops just short of doing so authorially.

Her fundamental ideological slant remains elusive and may be more ambiguous in *The Little Karoo* than in her later work. Coetzee detects in *The Beadle* “her vision of a patriarchalism purged of its tyrannical side” (72). This comment illuminates Smith’s development but perhaps does not reflect the more open-ended, exploratory qualities of the best stories in *The Little Karoo*. Granted, Niklaas’s rebellion against the insecurity of his tenure is presented as a sexual aberration, rather than as the legitimate grievance of a landless exploited worker. Still in “The Sinner,” after all, Toontje manages to dethrone not just one but two patriarchs, the landowner and Niklaas. As Hooper implies, the pathetic, undignified figure of Niklaas with his eleven children—one of whom he is in love with and wants to marry!—seems an odd vessel for a conservative patriarchal message. There are elements of parody and even romantic irony in Smith’s early stories that bolster Hooper’s argument for the importance of surprise.

This aspect has also been explored by Harold Scheub, who notes that the oral material in Smith’s journals often consists of trickster narratives, in which “a sense of irony is generated by the slow growth of awareness that the tricksters are actually the dupes.” Scheub shows that when she worked up this material in her published stories, the result was “dualism, bringing diverse imagery into parallel alignment.”¹⁰

Unlikely though it seems given the seriousness of its themes, a trickster narrative is a basic structural element in “The Sinner.” Niklaas, the *bijwoner* (tenant farmer), provides the story’s first, but not its only dupe. (The landowner is the other.) Niklaas, who initially sees himself as God’s charioteer, soon reveals himself to be a pathetic, one dimen-

sional figure smothered by his oversized spiritual clothes, “a small, weak, religious man” dwarfed by a “tall, patient, silent” wife (68). Niklaas sees himself as an elect follower whose special relationship with God has suddenly crumbled. Actually he goes further than this. As Hooper points out, Niklaas thinks he has been deserted by a God who “was no longer his friend. God was, in fact, but another Toontje ... as patient and as secret, and as silent” (“The Sinner” 71). One of Smith’s fortes is the presentation of religious beliefs at a psychic level, where she shows an almost comic “mash up” between Old Testament narrative and its practical redaction in the peasant mind. Niklaas wanted his favorite daughter Saartje to remain unmarried, but a fickle deity somehow double-crossed him. Now Niklaas hates everyone but this one daughter—his God, his master, his wife, his ten other children. Consumed by dissatisfaction, he succumbs to the charms of an incomer to the area, flirtatious Jacoba Nooi.

Hooper notes that women “initiate the action and men respond to it” (80) in Smith’s plots. This point can be pressed further. Koba is one of three women (the others being the daughter and the wife) who, in structural terms, undermine Niklaas’s belief that he belongs at the center of his own story. Koba’s shell-encrusted mirror is just one of several mirrors in “The Sinner,” which, as in “Desolation” and “The Schoolmaster,” explores storytelling itself as a “fork in the road”—a way of accessing, but also of misinterpreting, interpersonal experience—of truth telling as well as lying. Storytelling for Smith is a coping mechanism, a crutch that propels human beings forward through hardship. It is a hop-along way of pushing through life’s treacherous currents rather than an authoritative shaping scheme. An imperfect and dangerous mirror, storytelling breaks down separation and aloneness but threatens to consume those who naively believe in it.

Mesmerized by Koba’s sing-song speech and the image of himself in her dancing mirror, Niklaas leaves his wife, children, and tobacco fields, following Koba across the river to the fertile hills of the Kom-buis. At this point, Smith unveils the “back story” that will displace the husband’s story. This is the typical mid-point of her narratives, the

reversal that challenges the reader's projections about the future course of the characters. While Niklaas completes his transformation into "the sinner" of the title, his wife Toontje secures not just their tenancy on their Platkops farm but her husband's reputation in the community by forging a brutal bargain with the landowner. The master's initial response to the news of his tenant's defection—"May his soul burn in hell and Koba's also" (74)—mirrors Niklaas's puritanical absolutism. However, by evoking shared memories and posing hard rhetorical questions, Toontje provokes the master to recollect their own affair in the Kombuis, which occurred just before her marriage. Toontje uses Niklaas's infidelity as a mirror to reveal ("darkly" as well as "face to face") some hidden facets of her relationship with Niklaas's master. Just as Koba worked on Niklaas, so Toontje provokes van Reenen to recall an affair that apparently resulted in her pregnancy with Saartje. For a fleeting moment, Toontje's mirror to the past reveals the emotional warmth underneath the landowner's oppressive façade:

'Toontje!' cried the old man, his mind moving, slow and bewildered, from his tobacco to the past. 'Toontje!'

'Andries!'

For a moment their eyes met, and in that moment the secret which Toontje hid in her heart and Niklaas had never fathomed, lay bared between them. The moment passed ... as if it had never been. (74)

Note that "the moment passed." The threefold repetition of the word "moment" is crucially important. Toontje exhibits an almost stoic refusal to cling to pleasure, or even to love. When van Reenen threatens resistance to her pleas to continue Niklaas's tenancy, Toontje shows the steel in her sinews. "Did I not marry the fool to save the master?" (75).

Their livelihood secured during Niklaas's absence, Toontje writes to her husband, asking him to return, not to public judgment as a failed patriarch, but to the more pathetic, and therefore more human, role of landless farmer and doubting father. "For there is not one of us that has not sinned" (82), she obliquely states. Toontje's New Testament echo both mirrors and supplants Niklaas's habitual Old Testament

frame of reference. Even so, Toontje's religiosity, unlike her husband's, resides at some distance from full disclosure. She neither judges Niklaas's "sin" nor reveals her own.

My reading of Toontje's veiled revelation is slightly different from Hooper's. She comments: "This exculpates Niklaas of his evidently incestuous obsession with his daughter, but incriminates Toontje in duping him as well as cuckolding him. It also contextualises Toontje's efforts to protect her husband from the likely consequences of his moral dereliction, because she has done the same for her lover in the past" ("Surprise" 78). I question this rich insight into Toontje's "cover up" in one respect. Hooper implies that the landowner's paternity of Niklaas's beloved daughter is definitely stated in the text. It is important to note, however, that the narrative is as reticent here as Toontje herself. The "secret" the narrative reveals is not of paternity but of love, a love that flashed and flickered once but that Toontje herself wisely does not rely on. Hooper says that Saartje is their "eldest" daughter ("Surprise" 72), but this is never stated in the text, nor do we know whether she is the first child to marry. All we are told is that she is Niklaas's "favourite daughter" (68). We are *not* told that Saartje is van Reenen's child rather than one of Toontje's ten other children. We are not told that Saartje is her oldest child nor even whether the landowner fathered any of her offspring. Toontje strongly hints that he did, but she is bargaining for her family and her livelihood. Smith's narrative mirror turns away from the plot at a key moment.¹¹ Readers are asked to respect the narrator's limited understanding of the ultimate basis of human affairs and to purge their curiosity. Smith, like Toontje, preserves her secrets.

In the story's final scene Niklaas cries when he reads his wife's message of forgiveness, which he interprets as the word of God. But if Niklaas is anything like his master, his moment of humility will quickly pass. Smith lays equal weight on the poverty of the mind, the foul rag and bone shop, and its strength. A tempered fool, Niklaas returns to his children, his master, and his master's master, his tall, silent wife.

Compared with Toontje, Niklaas remains a victim rather than an agent. This is a man who can abandon his wife but cannot elude her because she is literally and figuratively “taller.” Toontje’s growth in stature culminates in her letter to Niklaas, a tissue of near truths and ventriloquized fabulation that rivals her creator in its story-telling arts. “The master told me this day that he will leave the lands to Ockert and me till you come again to Platkops dorp, and to all that speak of it he says that he himself has sent you to the Kombuis For surely, Niklaas, when your madness leaves you, you will come again to our children and me” (82). Of course, it is Toontje, not the master, who has invented a purposeful journey to cover up her husband’s wanderings, just as it is Toontje, not Niklaas, who sees the larger narrative horizon, the swelling and ebbing of the tides of lust. A covert feminization of Niklaas whittles away his patriarchal self-image, ridiculing his *droit de seigneur* fantasies about his daughter and wife, undermining his core identity as the sole husbandman of his allotted plot, and even turning him into a loose woman’s “kept man.” His wife’s and his mistress’s point of view on Niklaas prove to be surprisingly complementary. As she “sends on” Niklaas’s clothes, his wife first practices and then broadcasts a story: “Up to the Kombuis has the master sent Niklaas, to see how the Hollander works his tobacco” (76). His mistress likewise complains “Did I not bring you here to please the Hollander, and now you will not please him” (78). The emphasis is on Niklaas as a servant, a creature “sent” and “brought.” In a sustained assault on its two male characters, “The Sinner” unravels the patriarchal interpretation of Afrikaner life.

I would argue, in addition, that the structural intertwinement between Koba and Toontje overrides the binary classification that presents one as a virtuous wife and the other as a wicked interloper. Like the narrator, they are both plotters and concealers. Unlike Niklaas, both women practice conscious choice. Their attention is directed outward whereas he is buffeted by his own strong feelings. Moreover, Niklaas’s feelings are tangled up with religion in a feedback loop that confuses his own mind with the mind of God. Koba’s world is com-

pletely “God free,” whereas Toontje has arguably a “just enough” practical grasp of religious precept. Even so, the theodicy in Smith’s early stories seems to me to be more stoic than providential. The contrast between purposeful and irrational, emotion driven travel that Smith explores in “Desolation” and “The Schoolmaster” reappears in “The Sinner.” The schoolmaster’s self-imposed sentence—“I that have killed mules must now work like a mule if I would live” (51)—echoes Cleanthes’ famous dictum. “Like a dog tied to a cart, and compelled to go wherever it goes,”¹² human beings must endure their fate, but can choose to do so willingly or unwillingly.

We know from her journals that Smith felt solidarity with people like her farmer friend Thys Taute, who “had never been able to believe in Christ.” She says “We got to feel ... like two sinners shut out of Heaven by the *predikant*. If the *predikants* would preach the humanity of Christ, not the divinity, take him for a peasant teacher instead of the Son of God ... they would do more for sinners like Thys and me.”¹³ Perhaps the most basic question she explores in “The Sinner” turns on the contradictory and self-destructive ways human beings hold a mirror up to God. Who does God mirror? The first half to the story shows that Niklaas’s fixed conception of God is actually fluctuating and unstable. God is like himself, righteous where all others are wrong. God is like his master, overbearing and oppressive; God is like his wife, inscrutably withdrawn. Niklaas has to silence his own phantom gods to allow God—or maybe just his wife—to speak. As Hooper points out, religious language, like other forms of speech in Smith’s stories, can block communication and understanding. Just beyond the narrator’s consciousness, the nexus of parallels and reversals aligns the rich imagery of the Bible with the flowery locutions of Koba Nooi. Against the “logos,” the order of rules, prohibitions, and singular words, Smith sets the “mythos,” the order of stories, imperfect, ambiguous, and doomed to be repeated.

In a terse summary of the economic backdrop to “The Sinner,” the narrator lists the work sequence in tobacco cultivation as “plant, weed, cut, dry, strip, dip, and twist” (70). The terms “strip, dip, and

twist" echo the structure of the story, which is an ordeal for "the sinner" that incorporates a reversal engineered by his wife. Niklaas is "stripped" of his religious pretensions and "dipped" in the destructive elements of lust and travel. The "twist" or chiasmus occurs when Toontje chooses not to reject him for his infidelity but to see in her husband's sudden turbulent emotions a mirror of her own affair with the landowner. Viewed in this way, "The Sinner" becomes a kind of John Barleycorn story adapted to South African conditions, an ordeal of spiritual death and rebirth through which Niklaas is pressed. This mythic interpretation of the story's pattern accommodates Hooper's concern with the complexities and paradoxes of moral behavior, but extends it to storytelling as well. As Scheub points out, the trickster is an artist blurring divisions "until reality and fantasy are experienced if only for a few moments as identical" (11). In tobacco planting, as in tricking and storytelling, the stripping and twisting has to be done at exactly the right time.

And this is surely one of the functions of the proper names analyzed by Hooper, such as the allusion to the biblical Sarah in Niklaas's daughter Saartje. Evocative names take the sting of solitariness out of the story. Smith's artful deployment of structures of parallelism and allusion holds up a mirror to the narrator's arts. The storyteller in turn holds up a mirror to other stories. Niklaas sees only a phantom image of himself in Koba's mirror, whereas his wife sees in Niklaas a mirror of her own history and a lesson about the borderline between illusory and permanent attachments.

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NOTES

¹Hooper's essays are: "'Desolation,' Destitution, Dereliction," *English in Africa* 26.1 (May 1999): 33-43; "The Ethics of Modality in Pauline Smith's 'The Sisters,'" *Textual Ethos Studies or Locating Ethics*, ed. Anna Fahraeus and AnnKatrin Jonsson, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005) 133-44; "Homeless: The Motif of Eviction in Two

Early South African Narrative Texts," *Flight from Certainty: The Dilemma of Identity and Exile*, ed. Anne Luyat and Francine Tolron (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001) 238-50; "Naming the Father: Terms of Endearment, Sexuality and Servitude in *The Beadle*," *Nomina Africana* 10.1-2 (1997): 67-78; "The Renunciation of Voice and the Language of Silence: Pauline Smith's 'The Schoolmaster,'" *English Studies in Africa* 34.1 (1991): 21-26; "Textual Surprise in Pauline Smith's 'The Sinner,'" *Connotations: A Journal for Critical Debate* 14.1-3 (2004-2005): 68-86.

²Arnold Bennett, "Introduction" to Pauline Smith, *The Little Karoo* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930) 11.

³Some examples are Cherry Wilhelm, "The Style of Poverty: The Language of Pauline Smith's Little Karoo," *English Studies in Africa* 20 (1977): 65-78; Tony Voss, "Die Pêrels van Pauline or, The History of Smith," *English in Africa* 11.1 (May 1984): 107-17. See also two important articles by Michael Cosser "Undercurrent Dialogue: Free Indirect Discourse in Pauline Smith's 'The Pain,'" *English in Africa* 19.2 (Oct. 1992): 85-100; and "A Question of Silence: The Deployment of the Interrogative Statement in Pauline Smith's *The Beadle*," *English in Africa* 20.2 (Oct. 1993): 47-66.

⁴*Pauline Smith* (New York: Twayne, 1969) 56.

⁵Unsigned review. *The Nation*, 2 September 1925: 261.

⁶J. M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988) 115-26. See also Coetzee's "Pauline Smith and the Afrikaans Language," *English in Africa* 8.1 (March 1981): 25-32.

⁷Smith herself cites Millin's comment in a 1948 letter to Jonathan Cape. Quoted in "Introduction: A Fundamental Simplicity," *Secret Fire: The 1913-14 South African Journal of Pauline Smith*, ed. Harold Scheub (Pietermaritzburg: U of Natal P, 1997) xl.

⁸Two chapters from "Winter Sacrament" and an account of Smith's struggle to push it forward are included in *The Unknown Pauline Smith*, ed. Ernest Pereira (Pietermaritzburg: U of Natal P, 1993) 151-76.

⁹David I. Ker, *The African Novel and the Modernist Tradition* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997) 16.

¹⁰"Pauline Smith and the Oral Tradition: The Koenraad Tales," *English in Africa* 8.1 (March 1981): 1-11, 10; 7.

¹¹There is a similar aporia in Smith's *Little Karoo* story "The Schoolmaster." See Cherry Wilhelm, "The Style of Poverty" 74. Hooper offers a different interpretation from Wilhelm. See "The Renunciation of Voice" 24.

¹²The analogy is credited to Cleanthes in Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2004) 243. Giovanni Reale in *The Systems of the Hellenistic Age*, vol. 2 of *A History of Ancient Philosophy*, ed. John R. Catan (Albany: State U of New York P, 1985) 254 quotes a longer version by Hyppolitus.

¹³*Secret Fire* 344.