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“The rarest, most complex & most lately developed form of aestheticism”: Olive Schreiner, decadence, and the aesthetic education of the senses

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ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on Olive Schreiner’s personal correspondence and the allegories collected in *Dreams* (1890) to explore her complicated relationship to late-Victorian Decadence. I argue that Schreiner modified Decadent writers’ use of intersensoriality and synaesthesia to educate her readers into a new kind of common sense, one aligned with her own position as a progressive woman writer from the global periphery. While she rejected the exclusivity, individualism, and celebration of sensual indulgence for its own sake found in much canonical Decadent writing, she was nevertheless inspired by its deployment of the aesthetic to retrain the body to appreciate alternatives to a *sensus communis* of the kind described in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790). She saw Decadence encouraging the discovery of new ways of perceiving reality beyond the apparent “common sense” of Victorian liberal humanism. Like the Decadents, but in her own way, Schreiner challenged the aesthetic norms that helped to secure the hegemony of bourgeois European culture, contributing to the late nineteenth century’s broad eruption of interest in art’s role in both producing and contesting the prevailing liberal order.

KEYWORDS

Decadence; aestheticism; aesthetics; senses; allegory; liberalism

At a key moment in her posthumously published collection of articles *Thoughts on South Africa* (1923), Olive Schreiner uses a decadent image to make an un-decadent point. While imagining a future for her homeland within the declining British Empire, the author and activist says of the English language:

We do not dream of our language that it shall forcibly destroy the world’s speeches and all they contain, reigning in solitary grandeur, but, as gold in a ring binds into one circle rare gems of every kind and some of infinitely greater beauty than itself, so we dream that our speech being common may bind together and bring into one those treasures of thought and knowledge which the peoples of earth have produced, its highest function being that of making the treasures of all accessible to all.¹

Dreaming of a day when the English language is no longer a tool of imperial hegemony and has instead transformed into a bond that will unite all of humankind, Schreiner uses this image of the gold ring that holds rare gems together to express her vision of a

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beneficent multicultural universality, one that resists subsuming otherness into a univocal “solitary grandeur.” At first glance, such an image can be seen to suggest what Laura Chrisman calls the “standard rhetoric of British imperialism” that sometimes appears in Schreiner’s nonfiction (despite her avowed commitments to antiracism and anticolonialism), where “the Empire seems to enjoy a monopoly over freedom.”² I maintain, however, that the synthesis of the particular and the universal that she envisions here is closer to the “aesthetic metaphors” Chrisman finds in Schreiner’s fiction, which were “a means of escaping or at least modifying the ‘epistemic violence’ of her non-fictional discussions of Empire, sexual difference and colonialism.”³ This metaphor of the ring is a notable departure from the many other literal references to gold and gemstones in *Thoughts on South Africa*, most of which appear within criticisms of European exploitation of Africa’s natural resources. For some readers, this aestheticized image of the world’s cultures as gemlike “beauties” may have recalled the jewels found throughout the writings of Decadent authors such as Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Vernon Lee, Arthur Symons, and Amy Levy, who were all either friends or acquaintances of Schreiner during her early literary career in the 1880s and 90s.⁴ Yet, while the ornamented language of Decadence typically signified opulence, elite privilege, refined taste, and individual superiority, Schreiner uses this metaphor to signify democratic equality and collectivity. She expresses a vision for a new kind of aesthetic beauty within the English language that will allow “the treasures of all” cultural productions made by humans to be “accessible to all.”

The present article takes this moment from *Thoughts on South Africa* to be exemplary of what Regenia Gagnier calls the “dialectics of modernization and decadence” as expressed in Schreiner’s writings more generally.⁵ I focus on a series of letters on the topic of aesthetics that Schreiner wrote to her friend, the eugenicist and mathematician Karl Pearson, and allegories collected in her influential volume *Dreams* (1890) to demonstrate how she modified what Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé call Decadent writers “significant preoccupation with intersensoriality and synaesthesia” in order to educate her readers into a new kind of common sense, one that would align with her own position as a progressive woman writer from the global periphery.⁶ With her allegories, Schreiner trains the reader to recognize alternatives to liberal-humanist modes of perception and prepares them to be receptive to the utopian socialism she articulates more explicitly in her nonfictional writings. In this article, however, I do not engage with her socialism but focus instead on how she adapts Decadent synaesthesia in her allegories to express her dialectical understanding of the relationship between self and other.

It has become something of a truism that Schreiner’s writings express what Ann Heilmann refers to as “the essential correlation between the imposition of gender, race and class hegemonies, an insight which resulted in her firm commitment to universal human rights.”⁷ These beliefs led her to affirm the dignity of those subjects subordinated as “primitive” by the dominant culture and to develop a mode of writing that challenged the isolated, monadic vision of selfhood on which Victorian liberal ideology relied. Reading her allegories in the context of her engagement with Decadence reveals the extent to which she relied upon what Kandice Chuh calls “the material impact of aesthetics—of matters of beauty as matters of power and politics—[...] as an organizing principle of a humanism” that is “disarticulated from liberalism.”⁸ While she rejected the exclusivity, individualism, and celebration of sensual indulgence for its own sake

found in much late-Victorian Decadent writing, I maintain that she was nevertheless also inspired by its deployment of the aesthetic to retrain the body to appreciate alternatives to “common sensical” ways of perceiving reality and its challenges to the aesthetic norms that helped to secure the hegemony of bourgeois liberal culture.

1. Schreiner, primitivism, aestheticism

Schreiner’s ambivalent relationship to Decadence was shared by many other New Women authors. Wilde, who promoted the careers of many New Women in his capacity as editor of *The Woman’s World* from 1887 to 1889, was the original publishers of three of Schreiner’s eleven allegories that would eventually comprise *Dreams*. This collection was favorably reviewed in the *Athenaeum* in 1891 by Symons, an acquaintance of Schreiner. She was friends with Levy and corresponded with Lee, two women who were prominent within Decadent circles. These personal and professional connections were typical of the era, leading the New Women and Decadents to be “explicitly connected in the mind of critics, reviewers and journalists during the 1890s” owing to “[t]heir shared rejection of marriage, fascination with social outcasts (the poor, criminals, prostitutes) and exploration of heightened experiences,” as Sarah Parker notes.⁹ Despite such overlaps, late Victorian feminists were also attentive to the often virulent misogyny of Decadent authors, as has been noted by Elaine Showalter and Sally Ledger.¹⁰ Parker explains that this context created a situation where New Women authors could “use Decadent imagery to express the transgressive possibilities of female desire,” yet also employ the same tropes “to condemn the sexual excesses of men and to hint at the dangers of surrendering to pleasure.”¹¹

Despite increasing scholarly awareness of the ongoing dialogue between New Women and Decadents, critics have often disavowed significant connections between Schreiner’s literary techniques and the more ostentatious prose of her friends and contemporaries. This can be at least partially ascribed to the reception of her writings. After the posthumous publication of a rather condescending biography by her estranged husband Samuel Cronwright-Schreiner in 1924, it was common to assert that her devotion to literary artistry was compromised by her devotion to feminist, anti-imperialist, and anti-war activism. This perspective, combined with the eager embrace of her writings by the suffragist and socialist movements, led many critics to focus on the political content of her work rather than its aesthetic form.¹² Consequently, even those critics who have sought to recognize Schreiner as an innovative craftsperson have done so by aligning her with more obviously political literary figures and movements. Gerald Monsman has argued that Schreiner “resisted an art-for-art’s-sake aestheticism” in allegories that were “closer to the moralistic teachings of [George] Eliot than the enigmatic vocables of [Stéphane] Mallarmé, for she intended them to fulfill an unabashedly didactic and polemic function.”¹³ More recently, Jade Munslow Ong has asserted that

[u]nlike her literary acquaintances, who either turned to decadent themes as a retreat from the modern world, or impassively represented its morbid, perverse and harsh realities, Schreiner’s writing had deep emotional and political meaning, and she insisted on the moral and social purpose of her art,

making her, in Ong’s view, the originator of a distinctly African version of modernism.¹⁴

While explicitly Decadent themes are indeed largely absent from her writings, I propose that she was nevertheless just as inspired by Decadent literary techniques as any New Woman author in her “unabashedly didactic and polemical” writings. These connections are not to be found in tropes of disease, luxury, languor, and sexual perversity. Rather, she shared with the Decadents an interest in cultivating uncommon and counterintuitive ways of perceiving the world through the senses. Both Schreiner and the Decadents insist on the artistic value in cultivating the body’s capacity for sensory experiences that the dominant culture deems unnatural. While they differed sharply regarding what to do with that newly cultivated disposition—a difference that can be ascribed in large part to Schreiner’s more explicit and emphatic political commitments and her abiding interest in primitivism, about which more below—I maintain that she was inspired by the alternative modes of aesthetic education located in Decadent writing.

Ong has identified the revaluation of the primitive to be central to Schreiner’s distinctively South African literary project. She offers a

corrective [...] to the view that European engagements with Africa always constitute an adoption of the primitive (as belonging to an earlier period, or a culture characterised as crude or simple). Instead, [...] engagement with the primitive in Africa can now be read in the sense of an engagement with the *first* and *original*.¹⁵

Schreiner’s allegories in particular were inspired by both indigenous “Xhosa orature” and imported “Christian mythology” to express “both the necessity and difficulty of representing Other experiences, typically configured in South African literature through primitivist tropes. It is not an overstatement to suggest that allegory is in fact the predominant form in which Anglophone South African literature arises.”¹⁶ In Ong’s words, allegory’s ability to support multiple interpretations within the unity of a single story populated by universalizing abstractions allowed “radical South African authors [...] to acknowledge alternative paradigms of experience – those of women, animals, black and colored Africans, and the working classes – without obstructing the real and often unheard voices of those disenfranchised by imperialist domination.”¹⁷

Schreiner’s primitivist allegories are an aesthetic strategy for challenging Victorian liberal humanism, insofar as this ideology worked to hide the figurative and literal violence of imperialist heteropatriarchy. Chuh explains that one of the ways that liberal humanism perpetuates multiple forms of oppression under the guise of Enlightenment is through an aesthetic discourse that associates primitivism with intellectual underdevelopment and local particularity. For Chuh, this is especially apparent in Immanuel Kant’s aesthetics through the notion of the *sensus communis*, or “common sense” that he presents in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Western primitivist discourse

justifies domination by providing for the differentiated capacity for exemplary humanity on the basis of geography and gender difference made to appear natural, commonsensical. [...] Aesthetic education in its received form attempts to align perception with conception in the production of this common sense.¹⁸

In other words, an education in aesthetic judgment, in the ability to perceive and assess rightly what Matthew Arnold famously called “the best which has been thought and said,” is actually a method for naturalizing the way the culturally dominant group—in this case, bourgeois white European males—perceives the world by deeming it to be

simply self-evidently true in the eyes of everyone who has developed their inherent capacity for reasoned deliberation.¹⁹ Thus Kant argues that, because judgments of aesthetic taste involve “a subjective principle which determines what pleases or displeases only by feeling and not by concepts, but yet with universal validity, [...] such a principle [can] only be regarded as a *common sense* [*sensus communis*].”²⁰ Since this common-sense appreciation of beauty is universal and ostensibly available to everyone, those who depart from such judgments are, according to Kant, either unfit and backwards, hopelessly mired in their own particularity and “ontologically lacking competence.”²¹ The perceptions of those who are positioned outside the culturally dominant group by virtue of their gender, race, or geography are inevitably deemed unbeautiful, testament to their inadequately developed humanity and inability to achieve a truly universal “common sense” understanding of the world. In other words, the problem is their primitivism. Whatever experiences they have are held to be only personal and idiosyncratic, thus marking the incommensurability between their ineluctably particular subjectivity and the putatively universal, rational principles (privileging the position of white Western males) that are the prerequisite for liberal self-governance.

To combat this naturalization of imperialist white supremacy, Chuh describes an alternative strategy of aesthetic education that brings “to bear the corporeal substrate, the visceral body that is vanished by the abstractions of modernity, [...] to assert the compresence of these nonequivalent senses, the compresence of incommensurate senses and sensibilities.”²² More specifically, a counterhegemonic aesthetic education would challenge the role that “the visual” plays as “the privileged sense of Western modernity” and its association with the dominating gaze of the white male imperialist.²³ Instead, it would insist that other modes of embodied sense perception—hearing, touch, taste, smell—that are frequently associated with the putatively underdeveloped consciousness of racial, gender, and sexual “others” also have the capacity to be beautiful. A counterhegemonic aesthetic education would thus elevate ostensibly primitive modes of sensation to the dignity of the *sensus communis*. One of the primary ways Schreiner accomplished this in her writing was by insisting on the value of non-visual modes of perception—a technique she learned from Decadent authors whose aesthetics ran counter to the “common sense” of liberal, bourgeois Victorian culture, even if they were not as explicitly invested as Schreiner in anti-imperialism or countering the cultural hegemony of white masculinity.

Schreiner’s Decadent-leaning, non-visual aesthetics are clearest in two letters on aesthetics she wrote to Karl Pearson in 1886. She had joined Pearson’s Men and Women’s Club in London in 1885, maintaining a close friendship and extensive correspondence with him until returning to South Africa in 1889.²⁴ In the first of these letters, written on 3 July 1886, she begins

You say the senses of taste & touch seem to have no intellectual side, & so you doubt whether they can ever become aesthetic. But have they not? & are they not even now largely used aesthetically? I think so. Touch [...] is the root of almost all our intellectual knowledge! So it seems to me. [...] All ideas of extention [sic.], weight, size, age, distance, we derive from touch; a blind person can be perfectly correct in all these matter [sic.]. (After all what is sight but a portion of the surface becoming highly modified & sensitive, till it is cons-cious [sic.] even of the touch of light ...).²⁵

Schreiner challenges an assertion apparently made by Pearson in his previous letter that vision is the only sense capable of attaining what can be considered a properly “intellectual” and “aesthetic” understanding of the world. His comments reflect one of the dominant beliefs of Western culture: that visuality has the privilege of being the only mode of perception allowing for a properly disinterested, rational, “common sense” understanding of the world. As Jacques Derrida explains through recourse to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, the association of “sight with knowledge” persists throughout Western intellectual history:

sensations give pleasure, “even apart from their usefulness.” The pleasure of useless sensations explains the desire to know for the sake of knowing, the desire for knowledge with no practical purpose. And this is more true of sight than of the other senses.²⁶

Schreiner, however, challenges the association between sight and knowledge by subordinating the visual to the apparently lower sense of tactility, even categorizing sight as merely a particular and specialized kind of touch.

She similarly says that taste “has certainly become aesthetic to a large extent” and that “[w]ith regard to smell it’s only struck me just now, that we have the remarkable case of a sense which has become entirely aesthetic almost!”²⁷ To support these claims, she draws upon the experiences of beings typically considered to be to be primitively “other,” aesthetic impressions that are deemed undeveloped or inadequately developed compared to the ostensibly universal perceptions of adult, white, male, able-bodied subject. In addition to the “blind person” referenced above who can gain accurate knowledge of the world solely through touch, she evokes the cat who “uses her sense aesthetically when she rubbs [sic.] her face against velvet, & a dog when he comes & stands besides [sic.] you & looks up into your face that you my touch him on the head,” the pre-socialized “child” who “cr [ies] for the moon,” and her own childhood experience of “climbing up at the risk of my neck on chairs & hassocks to stroke the face of a picture I thought beautiful.”²⁸ Rather than placing these figures in a developmental trajectory that culminates in the distanced and disinterested visual perceptions of the assumedly more civilized subject, she instead draws upon the experiences of these others to affirm the universality and intellectual validity of these ostensibly lesser forms of sensation, and thereby implicitly also affirms the dignity of those beings, often deemed lesser, who experience these sensations.

In her follow-up to this letter, written on 7 July 1886, Schreiner clarifies to Pearson her understanding of the term “aesthetic,” and in the process identifies how her expansively democratic understanding of that term was both inspired by yet also departs from recent developments in contemporary aestheticism. She states that, “if a man strives to attain to intellectual truth or knowledge for the hope of any ^material^ gain to himself, or because he philanthropically wants to lessen the sufferings of mankind, then his work is not aesthetic.”²⁹ However, if he

strives after truth or knowledge simply for the infinite joy of holding it or that others may have the joy of holding it (this is the highest rarest, ^most complex^ & most lately developed form of aestheticism, & one which is rarely or never found combined with strong development of those lower forms of aestheticism such as regard taste smell, dress) then the strife is I think aesthetic.³⁰

She goes on to clarify that

To me the word aesthetic never in itself implies either praise or blame. The most degraded type of the human creature I have known is also one of the most aesthetic. A man who will send a little child quivering & crying out of a room because she has on a dress whose colour does not please him, who will get up & leave a table because there is some dish that offends him; who holds it impossible that an ugly woman or a deformed man should ever be loved by a person of the opposite sex; such a man is so immersed in the lower forms of aesthetic feeling that one knows the higher must be forever shut off from him.³¹

Schreiner here appears to respond to criticisms of the art philosophies recently articulated by figures such as Walter Pater and A.C. Swinburne, who at the time would likely have embodied “the rarest, most complex, & most lately developed form of aestheticism.” While their writings were frequently criticized for being amoral, irreligious, perverse, and unduly focused on the pursuit of mere personal pleasure, Schreiner suggests that such criticisms only refer to the “lower forms of aesthetic feeling.” This form of aestheticism can indeed result in selfish behavior that only succeeds in reenforcing the exclusionary status quo, one that classifies poorly-dressed children, “the ugly,” and “the deformed” as lesser beings who are “ontologically incapable” because they do not adhere to the dominant culture’s limited visual ideal of beauty. Yet the higher form of aestheticism can encourage one to transcend the limits of contingent worldly concerns, even if they are concerns of the highest order (i.e. “to lessen the sufferings of mankind”), in favor of the disinterested pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. This version of Decadence would not be bound to preexisting notions and, she suggests, could inspire intellectual and ethical innovation. It is this higher version of Decadence that she explores in the allegories collected in *Dreams*.

2. Counterhegemonic decadence in *Dreams*

As her letters suggest, Schreiner’s interest in forms of sensation that depart from culturally normative ways of perceiving reality was shared with many of the Decadents. Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé have claimed that

the tradition of literary Decadence in the nineteenth century stands out for its preoccupation, even obsession, with extreme sensations. Indeed, this obsession is a defining feature of the tradition. Almost without exception, Decadent writers aimed to bring the reader’s senses alive.³²

Like Schreiner, they also sought to shake their readers out of acquiescence to dominant values: “Aesthetes and Decadents found in sensory experience an escape from the evil of banality, and in acts of private sensual indulgence they identified a way of shocking the complacent and culturally deodorized middle classes.”³³ For this reason, some Decadent writers sought to claim Schreiner as one of their own, correctly identifying her use of intensely intersensorial literary techniques for socially oppositional purposes, even if they did not recognize or acknowledge the full extent of her political goals. In his rave review of *Dreams*, Symons, perhaps the foremost English-language polemicist for Decadence in his critical writings and poetry, enlisted her into the project of reeducating the reader’s senses:

The allegories of Miss Schreiner are something entirely new, they can be compared only with the painted allegories of Mr. Watts. Written in exquisite prose—somewhat less spontaneously simple than the prose of the “African Farm,” but with more colour and harmony—they have the essential qualities of poetry, and are, indeed, poems in prose. [...] Into these

allegories Miss Schreiner seems to have put the soul of her soul; they express, in the only form possible, that passion for abstract ideas which in her lies deeper than any other. They are profoundly human, yet in no limited sense. Apprehended thus, the allegory may be considered the essence of art, all art being symbol, and allegories themselves pure symbols.³⁴

Symons, applying the quintessentially Decadent adjective “exquisite” to Schreiner’s use of language, deems her allegories to be “pure symbols” because they blur the boundaries separating different modes of artistic production—painting, prose, poetry—with the aim of expressing her overarching and unifying “passion for abstract ideas.” For him, they express in prose the same “color and harmony” found in George Frederic Watts’s Symbolist allegorical paintings, while at the same time approaching the formal qualities of lyric. Her allegories exemplify the quality that Pater called “*Anders-streben*” or other-striving in his essay “The School of Giorgione” (1877), which Margaux Poueymirou usefully summarizes as the idea that “an art form could take on the ‘otherness’ of a rival medium, thereby supplementing its own particular sensorial beauty with the qualities of another. The emergent synaesthetic or intersensorial work was not only more suggestive and affecting but also, a more salient cultural reflection.”³⁵ Accordingly, Symons focuses on her creation of a work that

is at once music and a picture[. . . T]he words seem to chant themselves to a music which we do not hear. To appreciate all that is meant by this new kind of prose the writer demands more assistance from the reader, for printed words in prose cannot become audible, as words in verse may more easily do, in the precise tone and rhythm intended without some sympathetic aim from without.³⁶

This description is akin to how Watts described his own painterly method, which he said was an attempt to “seize and hold the spectator” through a “suggestion of something much larger and better” than a more technically accomplished painting that gives “the whole intellectual idea at once and too completely.”³⁷ For Symons, Schreiner’s allegories represent a similar innovation in literary aesthetics because they enlist the embodied perceptual apparatus of the reader to achieve their artistic effect. The intersensorial qualities of the allegories are thus a kind of aesthetic education for the reader, training them to depart from normative modes of sensation through the act of “chant[ing] themselves to a music which we do not hear” and initiating them into a new way of perceiving reality.

Schreiner and the Decadents differ, however regarding the relative importance of individuality and collectivity in their respective counterhegemonic projects. David Weir notes that a Kantian notion of aesthetic education is central to Decadence, that “the uncommon sense of decadent taste seems to be something that requires cultivation. The senses, in short, need to be educated” to appreciate the beauty of objects and situations that mainstream society would dismiss as perverse or distasteful.³⁸ As we will see, Schreiner also articulates a version of aesthetic education in *Dreams*, but to very different ends. Her goal is to train readers to look beyond the boundaries between self and other and perceive the actual universality that underlies the seemingly atomized and isolated vision of selfhood that is central to liberal-humanist ideology. Doing so requires embracing intersensorial forms of perception that are incommensurate with the visual. For her, this involves not the cultivation of a superior standard of judgment achievable only by a few, but instead embracing primitive modes of sensation that are typically associated with “lesser” beings and are democratically accessible to everyone.

We see this in “A Dream of Wild Bees,” which Joyce Avrich Berkman refers to as “the most abstract of Schreiner’s dream allegories,” where “the fusion of the Ideal and the Real” is accomplished through “exceeding [the] limits” of commonplace sensory perception.³⁹ In this allegory, a pregnant woman dreams of bees who transform into humans. Each of them proposes to grant a blessing to her unborn child and, while she rejects offers of “Health,” “Wealth,” “Fame,” “Love,” and “Talent,” she finally accepts the blessing of the bee-human who offers to “*make the ideal real*” to the child.⁴⁰ This involves the creature laying a hand on the woman’s side and touching the “half-shaped brain” of “the antenatal thing.”⁴¹ Although the child’s eyes “had never seen the day,” this touch causes him to dream of “a sensation of light! Light—that it never had seen. Light—that perhaps it never should see! Light—that existed somewhere!” This passage, which recalls Schreiner’s description of sight as a specialized form of touch in the letter to Pearson discussed above, affirms the superiority of a literally underdeveloped form of sense perception that intermingles tactility and visuality. The fetus’s intersensorial experience of touch-sight in the womb will allow him as an adult to perceive the world’s beauty more clearly than the ostensibly more developed and sophisticated vision of others: the bee-human explains that, when “to other men, there is only the desert’s waste, he shall see a blue sea! On that sea the sun shines always, and the water is blue as burning amethyst, and the foam is white on the shore. A great land rises from it, and he shall see upon the mountaintops burning gold.”⁴² When the woman asks the bee-human “Is it real?” he responds, “What *is* real?” This obviously beautiful natural imagery is quite different from the exquisite distastefulness that appears frequently in Decadent writing. What they share, though, is the understanding that certain intersensorial modes of perception can elicit intellectually, emotionally, and aesthetically resonant alternatives to a “common-sense” understanding of reality. These cannot be discovered by those who accept normative definitions of value, the Health, Wealth, Fame, Love, and Talent associated with conventional notions of the good life. “A Dream of Wild Bees” was originally written as a letter to Pearson in 1889, after he and Schreiner had a falling out over the comparative importance of “imaginative empathy” versus material, scientific solutions to social ills.⁴³ While Decadent writing assumes that such transcendent perceptions of reality can only be achieved by a select few, Schreiner suggests that these perceptions actually flourish among forms of subjectivity that the culture typically ignores or discounts. In other words, while both Schreiner and the Decadents recognize that aesthetic perceptions are central to the construction of the dominant liberal-humanist order, Schreiner rejects Decadence’s celebration of a characteristically European form of isolated individualism in favor of an understanding of self and other as inextricably entangled with each other.

The aesthetic education that can elicit such a mode of perception is explored in “In a Ruined Chapel,” which Schreiner claimed to be her favorite among her allegories. Here, the speaker narrates that she fell asleep in an abandoned chapel and dreamed of an angel who tries to help a man who “cries out continually that one has injured him; and he would forgive him and cannot.”⁴⁴ In response, God gives the angel the ability

to unclothe a human soul; to take from it all those outward attributes of form, arid colour, and age, and sex, whereby one man is known from among his fellows and is marked off from

the rest, and the soul lay before [the Angel and the man], bare, as a man turning his eye inward beholds himself.

After the Angel reveals the “human soul” of the injuring man to the man who has been injured, the Angel asks the injured man,

“What is it?”

[The man] answered, “It is *!* it is myself!” And he went forward as if he would have lain his heart against it; but the angel held him back and covered his eyes.

Now God had given power to the angel further to unclothe that soul, to take from it all those outward attributes of time and place and circumstance whereby the individual life is marked off from the life of the whole. [...]

[T]he man bowed his head and shuddered. He whispered—“*It is God!*” [...]

And the angel said, “Have you forgiven him?”

But the man said, “How beautiful my brother is!”⁴⁵

I take this allegory to represent in microcosm the strategy of aesthetic education Schreiner pursued in her allegories more generally. By stripping individuals of “outward attributes of form,” the external visual indicators that mark people as different from their fellows, as well as the “outward attributes of time and place and circumstance” that signify contingent historical, geographic, and cultural particularities, one can perceive the underlying unity of one’s self and all others, as well as the unity of both with a universal truth that she here personifies as “God.”⁴⁶ Both Schreiner and the angel seek to cultivate in humans a mode of perception that acknowledges individuality but can also see beyond it. Crucially, Schreiner does not ascribe absolute metaphysical truth to either the “outward” impression of difference or “inward” sense of sameness. The angel does not allow the man to persist within the “unclothed” vision. Instead, these ostensibly contradictory perspectives can be held simultaneously if one embraces an aesthetic rather than a strictly rationalist perspective: the man does not say “I am my brother, and my brother is me!” but rather “how beautiful my brother is!” Like the ring that enhances the beauty of each individual jewel by holding them together, it is only via an aesthetic perception that one can comprehend the dialectical relationship between self and other, the universality that encompasses particulars without subsuming them into itself. While the normative organization of the senses enforced by liberal-humanist ideology insists on sovereign individuality and insuperable boundaries between self and other, which inevitably lead to conflict and estrangement, Schreiner here indicates that embracing alternative aesthetic modes of perception allow one to understand that difference and sameness depend upon each other yet do not collapse into each other.

She expresses the social and political implications of this idea in the longest and most complex allegory in *Dreams*, “The Sunlight Lay Across My Bed.” Here, the narrator describes a dream where God took her on a tour of Hell and Heaven. While in Heaven, she says that she:

saw one with closed eyes, singing, and his fellows were standing round him: and the light on the closed eyes was brighter than anything I had seen in Heaven. I asked one who it was. And he said, “Hush! Our singing bird.”

And I asked why the eyes shone so.

And he said, "They cannot see, and we have kissed them till they shone so."⁴⁷

Soon after, she says she:

saw they carried one without hands or feet. And a light came from the maimed limbs so bright that I could not look at them.

And I said to one, "What is it?"

He answered, "This is our brother who once fell and lost his hands and feet, and since then he cannot help himself; but we have touched the maimed stumps so often that now they shine brighter than anything in Heaven. We pass him on that he may shine on things that need much heat. No one is allowed to keep him long, he belongs to all": and they went on among the trees.

I said to God, "This is a strange land. I had thought blindness and maimedness were great evils. Here men make them to a rejoicing."

God said, "Didst thou then think that love had *need* of eyes and hands!"⁴⁸

Recalling her defenses of blindness and deformity in the letters to Pearson, Schreiner here affirms the value of modes of sense perception that would conventionally be considered "great evils." As Chuh states, "[t]he senses provide entry into the world; they are the mechanisms for interaction between the limits of ourselves and that which is held to be external to them."⁴⁹ In Schreiner's utopian space of heaven, what the narrator assumes to be deformations of the senses are not recognized by the angels or God as losses. Instead, they give rise to aesthetic and practical forms of value that are produced both by and for the collective: the "kisses" of Heaven's other inhabitants elicit light and song from the blind man, their touch on the stumps of the maimed man create useful "heat" that "belongs to all." This "love" that does not require "eyes and hands" is instead perceptible only by those who are no longer under the spell of normative sensorial engagements with reality. In heaven, the narrator undergoes a process of counterhegemonic aesthetic education that teaches her to reject the conventional European ways of understanding and instead comprehend the entanglement of self and other, which can only be understood through aesthetic, intersensorial modes of perception.

3. Conclusion

Before the narrator of "The Sunlight Lay Across My Bed" awakens, she dreams that she sees in heaven men gathering small stones and that, "when one found a stone he passed it on to his fellows, and he to another, and he to another. No man kept the stone he found."⁵⁰ Gerald Monsman notes that this image is an aesthetically redeemed version of the Kimberley diamond fields in Cape Colony, where Schreiner lived with her siblings in the 1870s, and which was the setting of much of her early fiction.⁵¹ In the introduction to their edition of *Dreams*, Barbara Black, Carly Nations, and Anna Spydell explain that, at Kimberley, "[d]iamond mining was a rigidly hierarchical industry" where "[w]hite overseers supervised, and surveilled, cheap and plentiful Black and Brown labor."⁵² While a conventional mode of comprehension would formulate this strict racial hierarchy as normative if not even natural, in Schreiner's utopian space of heaven this

oppression and abuse for the sake of capitalist profit transforms into the collective creation of a “crown” of stones that “was wrought according to a marvelous pattern: one pattern ran through all, yet each part was different.”⁵³ This image anticipates the gold ring set with jewels that Schreiner used to evoke the beautiful unity-in-diversity of the postcolonial English language in *Thoughts on South Africa*. In both cases, Schreiner takes the violent imposition of a universalizing structure as a *fait accompli*, the affordances of which can be turned to non-colonial or anti-colonial ends, insofar as it can be used to connect and communicate across cultures in a manner that circumvents Anglo control.

For Schreiner, this concept can be better expressed in an allegory conveyed to an aesthetically educated reader rather than in explicitly political rhetoric. As Schreiner states in her introduction to *Woman and Labour* (1911), she relies on allegories to supplement “prose argument [...] because while it is easy clearly to express abstract thoughts in argumentative prose, whatever emotion those thoughts awaken I have not felt myself able adequately to express except in the other form.”⁵⁴ Such overt political imagery would, perhaps, be difficult to find in the writings of Victorian Decadent authors, the hyper-individualist elitism of which Schreiner might well have classed as part of the “lower” Decadence disparaged in the letter to Pearson. Nevertheless, I maintain that she remained interested in what she called “the rarest, most complex & most lately developed form of aestheticism,” as evidenced by her use of allegory to induce the senses of her readers into new ways of perceiving reality. Schreiner’s allegorical writings can be understood to form part of the broad eruption of interest in the aesthetic during the late nineteenth century, one that sought to explore art’s role in both producing and contesting the prevailing liberal order.

Notes

1. Schreiner, *Thoughts on South Africa*, 355.
2. Chrisman, “Colonialism and Feminism,” 26–7.
3. *Ibid.*, 37. McClintock and Burdett similarly find Schreiner embracing a more progressive imperial and racial politics after the publication of *Story of an African Farm* (1883) established her international literary celebrity. Ledger, Clayton, and Hackett, however, are skeptical of the various positions on race she took throughout her career.
4. From Walter Pater’s famous “Conclusion” to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) to the infamous jewel-encrusted tortoise of J.K. Huysmans’s *À Rebours* (1884), richly described gemstones have been a hallmark of Decadent writing. See Mills, “Dandyism, Visuality and the ‘Camp Gem’.”
5. Gagnier, “From Barbarism to Decadence,” 166–181.
6. Desmarais and Condé, “Introduction,” 2.
7. Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies*, 123.
8. Chuh, *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*, 54.
9. Parker, “The New Woman,” 119.
10. See Showalter’s “Introduction” to *Daughters of Decadence* and Ledger’s *The New Woman*.
11. Parker, “The New Woman,” 120.
12. See Black et al., “Introduction,” 41–8.
13. Monsman, “Olive Schreiner’s Allegorical Vision,” 51–2.
14. Ong, *Olive Schreiner and African Modernism*, 155.
15. *Ibid.*, 10.
16. *Ibid.*, 147, 11.

17. Ong, *Olive Schreiner and African Modernism*, 11.
18. Chuh, *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*, 51.
19. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 50.
20. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 302.
21. Chuh, *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*, 52.
22. *Ibid.*, 67.
23. *Ibid.*, 61.
24. See Black et al., “Introduction,” 32–3.
25. Stanley, *Olive Schreiner Letters Online* (“Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 3 July 1886, University College London Library, Special Collections,” lines 6–9, 10–11, 14–18). Accessed May 5, 2021.
26. Derrida, “The Principle of Reason,” 4.
27. Stanley, *Olive Schreiner Letters Online*, (“Olive Schreiner to Karl Pearson, 3 July 1886, University College London Library, Special Collections,” lines 49, 65–66). Accessed May 5, 2021.
28. *Ibid.*, lines 25–28, 31, 41–42.
29. *Ibid.*, lines 30–33.
30. *Ibid.*, lines 33–39.
31. *Ibid.*, lines 45–54.
32. Desmarais and Condé, “Introduction,” 2.
33. *Ibid.*, 3.
34. Symons, “Review of *Dreams*,” 167. For Symons, Decadence and Symbolism are closely related phenomena, insofar as both seek to explore the unity that underlies diverse forms of aesthetic expression. This is evidenced by his retitling of his 1893 essay “The Decadent Movement in Literature” as “The Symbolist Movement in Literature.”
35. Margaux Poueymirou, “Walter Pater’s *Anders-Streben*.”
36. Symons, “Review of *Dreams*,” 167.
37. Quoted in Stewart, “Of Angst and Escapism,” 43–4.
38. Symons, “Review of *Dreams*,” 224.
39. Berkman, *Healing Imagination*, 215.
40. Schreiner, *Dreams*, 87–9.
41. *Ibid.*, 89.
42. *Ibid.*, 89.
43. Black et al., “Introduction,” 35.
44. Schreiner, *Dreams*, 92.
45. *Ibid.*, 94–5.
46. For a narratological analysis of Schreiner’s development of a “genderless” narrative voice in the allegories, see Saudo-Welby.
47. *Ibid.*, 114–5.
48. *Ibid.*, 115.
49. Chuh, *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*, 61.
50. Schreiner, *Dreams*, 116.
51. Monsman, “Olive Schreiner’s Allegorical Vision,” 59.
52. Black et al., “Introduction,” 16.
53. Schreiner, *Dreams*, 116.
54. Schreiner, *Woman and Labour*, 9.

Disclosure statement

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