

# 7 “She Wrote Peter Halket”: Fictive and Factive Devices in Olive Schreiner’s Letters and *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*

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## **Introduction: Fictive and Factive Devices**

The idea of ‘fictive devices’, from the work of Eakin (1985), concerns narrative devices which are deployed so as to make tellings or narratings ‘more telling’ in the colloquial sense, that is, more pointed and convincing. Such devices include neatening events and plot, re-working characterisation to fit actions and vice versa, denoting causality, and allocating or avoiding agency. They are not necessarily lies or deliberate misrepresentations, but more usually involve reorganisation and tidying so as to make ‘how it was’ more like ‘as it should have been’ in order to tell a good - in the sense of an interesting and convincing - story.

Discussion here develops Eakin’s idea by turning the analytical tool of ‘fictive devices’ back on itself and in on itself. Turning it back on itself, by exploring the use of factive devices in a fictional narrative; that is, the interconnections of the factual with, and its effects on, fictional narratives. And turning it in on itself, by examining the use of fictive devices in factual narratives, in the case explored here in letters which provide factual narratives with a close association with fictional writing, a short novel. This twin concept emphasises that ‘fictionalising’ in factual narratives usually happens in order to better convey the facts. It also brings to sight that ‘factionalising’ is a strong feature of how facts are utilised in fictional narratives, through drawing on ‘real life’ story lines, characterisations and denouements to tell a fictional story. In what follows, factive and fictive devices are used to discuss Olive Schreiner’s *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*, published in 1897, and Schreiner’s letters about it and the wider political context it was conceived and read in.

**Enter Olive Schreiner, *Trooper Peter* and the Schreiner Epistolarium**

Olive Schreiner was born in 1855 and died in 1920 in South Africa, in between living for extensive periods in Britain and elsewhere in Europe. She became internationally one of the most famous women of her age. A feminist and socialist, Schreiner was seen contemporaneously as the quintessential New Woman, emphasising as her work did the inter-relationship of three great 'questions' of the age, concerning women, labour and race (Stanley, 2002). She was the influential critic of imperialism and autocracy of the period, the crucial influence on Hobson's analysis and through him on Lenin's theory of imperialism. She was also the white colonialist who produced the most far-sighted thinking about race and racism in southern Africa of the time.

Schreiner's *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (*Trooper Peter* for short) is an allegorical novella which deals with 'real life' events occurring shortly before its publication, particularly regarding some massacres in Matabeleland and Mashonaland. It was published in London, and specifically names Cecil Rhodes as responsible for the massacres and the land-grabs which lay behind them. Rhodes at the time was the recently ex-Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, removed because of his complicity in the December 1895 Jamieson Raid, a failed imperialist coup against the Transvaal Republic. He was the leading figure in the British South Africa Company, chartered by Britain to run Matabeleland and Mashonaland; he was also the leading figure in De Beers diamond mining and a key figure in gold extraction. And in February 1897, during the week *Trooper Peter* was published there, Rhodes was in London being questioned by a Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry concerning his role in the Jamieson Raid and in the Chartered Company.

*Trooper Peter* is a novella, having the same plot-based structure of a full-length novel, rather than the episodic one of a short story. It also has an allegorical frame and associated 'beneath the surface' intentions, so the reader needs to read the surface story 'slantwise' (Tierney-Tello, 1996). This requires reading with its 'beneath the surface' other meaning in mind: the reader reads so as to ironise the surface story, which requires an active and 'knowing' reader because slantwise meanings are not immediately there on the surface. Thus on the surface, *Trooper Peter* is written as though a Christian morality tale concerning the murderous evil of Chartered Company troopers in Matabeleland and Mashonaland. Peter Halket is a rapist and murderer but thereby 'ordinary' among the troopers. Rhodes is the source of all evil, while Peter performs an act of Christian redemption which absolves him from earlier sins. However, the book's slantwise narrative is a savage condemnation of all hypocrisies about 'the grab for Africa', emphasising that those who do not actively oppose what is happening are guilty by association and it is Rhodes' followers who actually do the evil deeds.

Schreiner maintained correspondences with a wide circle of family, friends and acquaintances. There are some 7000 extant Schreiner letters in forty or so important collections which we are currently transcribing and will publish eventually as the complete Olive Schreiner letters. Around 300 letters comment on Rhodes and the way his political and business practices became a matrix or a system, as a specifically South African sub-type of capitalist imperialism mixed with autocracy and corruption. And within this sub-set, there are around thirty-five letters concerned with *Trooper Peter*, providing a different although related narrative from the novella, one which is temporally-emergent as well as dispersed between different correspondents.

### **Factionalising: Rhodes and the Hanging Tree**

Regarding factionalising in relation to the narrative structure and content of *Trooper Peter Halket*, there are two dominant factive devices. These are indissolubly linked to each other.

The first is provided by its photographic frontispiece of the hanging tree, shown in Figure 1. This tree, on the outskirts of Bulawayo, was where Rhodes' Chartered Company hanged so-called rebels from the uprisings in Matabeleland and Mashonaland. Clearly, this photograph of the hanging tree makes a very powerful visual statement which claims immediate factual status through both its visuality and its caption, (From a photograph.). And it is printed on the page opposite the title page, so that Schreiner's name acts as guarantor of both the authenticity of the photograph and also the essential facticity of the fictional narrative which follows. The photograph – or rather the event it represents -- is also described on pages 77-80 of the first edition of *Trooper Peter*, with the effect of looking, then reading the very visual description, back and forth, with the photograph acting to confirm the essential facticity of the 'factional' account in the text.

The second factive device concerns naming of Rhodes as personally responsible for these and related events, which occurs at nine points, shown in Figure 2. Rhodes is directly named in seven of these, and in two he is referred to obliquely using the fictional name often given him in the press at the time, 'the great Panjandrum'. In the unfolding narrative, these namings emphasise that Rhodes, and those who worship his brazen image, are directly responsible for the events in Matabeleland and Mashonaland. The hanging tree is the topic of one of the longest passages in which Rhodes is named; a second comes just a page later and repeats the association of Rhodes with death to black people. Together these act as one of the moral – or rather immoral – centres of the novella and are followed by two shorter deeply ironic passages in which wealth is conflated with 'greatness' by Peter, who praises its accumulation through the ruthless subjugation of entire peoples. The novella's other moral centre is more

ironic and bound up in its slantwise purposes: three minor characters, each so morally flawed as to be damned, emphasise that the power of 'Rhodes as a system' requires the knowing complicity of others.

**Figure 1** Hanging Tree



**Figure 2**

1 <sup>st</sup> edition 1897	
frontispiece	‘From a photograph’ – the hanging tree
28	Peter on Rhodes, syndicates, share dealing and the expropriation of land and minerals from ‘the natives’
48	‘The stranger’ [Jesus] emphasises that ‘Cecil Rhodes had nothing to do with my coming here’
77-9	long description by Peter of the horrors of hanging the supposed ‘spies’
81-4	Peter on Rhodes as death to Africans – ‘here he does what he likes’
86-7	Peter on Rhodes, profit, wealth and greatness
88-92	Peter on Rhodes and ‘greatness’ as shares, land and subjugated people
118-9	The Cape Town preacher – the Strop Bill
204-6	A Colonial Englishman - all deaths in Mashonaland are murders by the Company
209-11	A large handsome trooper - on ‘squaring’ and the worship of a brazen statue of ‘the great Panjandrum’

**Fictionalising: Yours sincerely, Olive Schreiner**

Some fictive devices in Schreiner’s letters which deal with Rhodes and *Trooper Peter* are now discussed. Schreiner never discussed her writing in any detail in her letters - she certainly referred to context, hindrances, and ‘external’ developments like publication possibilities, but the details were largely consigned to epistolary silence. However, a number of letters concern *Trooper Peter*, an indication of its special significance for her.

In the letters concerned with 'Rhodes' as a systemic phenomenon, there are a number of meta-level fictionalising elements which construct a narrative frame of mythic proportions (not surprising, given the extraordinary power of Rhodes and the impact he made on the economy and polity of southern Africa). There are two over-arching intertwined elements to this. The first concerns Schreiner's 'getting of wisdom' about Rhodes:

He might have all that was best and greatest in South Africa to his side... but he has chosen, not only to choose the worst men as his instruments, but to act on men always through the lowest sides of their nature. For the present I feel to him not as to a man who has only one path open to him, but as to a man who had, and who has looked steadily and carefully at both, and chosen the lower!

(OS to Will Schreiner, 13 August 1895, UCT BC 16)

And the second concerns the wider tragedy of Rhodes and his activities for South Africa:

We fight Rhodes because he means so much of oppression, injustice, and moral degradation in South Africa; - but if he passed away tomorrow there still remains the terrible fact that something in our society has formed the matrix which has fed, nourished, and built up such a man! It is the far future of Africa during the next twenty-five or fifty years which depresses me. I believe we are standing on the top of a long down-ward slope.

(OS to John X. Merriman, 3 April 1897, SAL MSC 15)

There are also sub-themes which connect to these over-arching elements, concerned with Rhodes' corruption and fall in connection with him 'squaring' by corrupting people; his introduction of the so-called the Strop Bill and him passing the Glen Grey Act which later underpinned apartheid land policies; his involvement in the Jamieson Raid; the horrific events in Matabeleland and Mashonaland; and concerning Schreiner writing *Trooper Peter*. This latter is outlined through Schreiner's letters.

Firstly, there is the statement that *Trooper Peter* 'came all at once' into Schreiner's mind:

... the other morning I woke, and as I opened my eyes there was an allegory full fledged in my mind! A sort of allegory story about Matabele land...

(OS to Betty Molteno, Wednesday, ?20 August 1896, UCT BC16)

All my stories come to me that way I never consciously try to make one, but none except Peter Halket ever came so completely and at once, they are sometimes only in bits for months before they are ready...About six o'clock I woke, and jumped out of bed[.] Cron [her husband] asked me what was the matter, and I said a whole new story had come to me just as I woke, and I told him all just as it stands but short.

(OS to Ettie Stakesby-Lewis, 25 December 1901, UCT BC1080)

The allegory, Schreiner's letters state, arrived 'full fledged' - she woke and it was there complete and fully-formed in her consciousness. Its appearance was non-volitional and 'unthought', and in this it was both like, but at basis very unlike, her other writing, because only it had arrived 'completely and at once'.

Secondly, Schreiner's letters elide what becomes the invisible work involved in what she called 'writing out' or 'copying out':

I have been copying out a little bit of my Allegory story about Mashonaland...  
(OS to Betty Molteno, Wednesday, ?30 September 1896, UCT BC16)

I'll send you my story Peter Halket when I've done copying it out...  
(OS to Betty Molteno, 21 October 1896, UCT BC16)

These are the terms Schreiner invariably used to describe the day-to-day activities of writing, of crafting an idea on paper; and she distinguished this from 'writing', which for her was specifically its conception in her mind. In the case of *Trooper Peter*, this process misleadingly called 'copying out' took over three focused months' work. However, this is mentioned only in passing and consequently becomes largely invisibilised as a creative and time-consuming activity, with the effect of making the inspirational aspects of the novella's origins stronger because no detail is provided of the grounded activities involved.

Thirdly, Schreiner's letters emphasise 'proofs' of the facticity of the book's contents:

With regard to Peter Halket being over drawn, dear Laddie; perhaps much as you know about most points connected with South Africa more than I do, I may know some aspects of the Northern matter better. You see I have known intimately such numbers of young men up there, and from their letters, the journals they have sent me, and from the conversations we have had with some of them in Kimberley when they came down... (OS to Will Schreiner, 15 March 1897, UCT BC16)

I wish I could write you a long letter and tell you of some facts I know with regard to Chartered doings in the North. I fancy few people have been in the position to learn all we know..... (OS to Will Schreiner, 18 March 1897, UCT BC16)

Thus although Schreiner does not comment on the creativity of the fictionalising she engaged in, she does detail things which emphasise or confirm 'proofs' for the factive aspects of *Trooper Peter*. These include a trail of people, letters and other writings to her door providing her with information about 'the Northern matter', and then visits from people 'in the know', who in different ways corroborate the facticity of her account. Interestingly, she does not ever mention the photograph, the most 'proof like' of all information she

received. Indeed, notably, she never mentions anything in specific terms, with her worries about reprisals from Rhodes and his henchmen the reason for this.

### **Brief Conclusions**

Narrative scholars are aware of the complexities of narrative forms, and our discussion here brings some of these complexities to analytical attention. Both factionalising and fictionalising are deployed in fictional narratives, and, both factionalising and fictionalising are deployed in factual narratives, for the devices for telling and telling convincingly are very similar across both. The main difference concerns claims to referentiality which can be made to 'stick' or not (and thus the subversiveness of lies in purportedly factual narratives).

In relation to Schreiner's *Trooper Peter* and her letters concerning it, using the idea of factionalising and fictionalising to read across these sources brings to analytic sight the ambiguous, rather than slantwise, message that Schreiner the author was actually conveying to her reading audience. In various letters, Schreiner states that there is a crucial difference between *Trooper Peter* and her other writings, because it 'just arrived', and strongly implies that its origins were in effect 'real world' free. However, in other letters Schreiner emphasises her special knowledge about the events that the novella was concerned with, that this came from people and from written documents with 'I-witness' status, and thus that it was in a very referential way 'real world' grounded.

This ambiguity lies within *Trooper Peter*, indeed, not just in Schreiner's letters. That is, the novella is factionalised, but not fully factual, something which perusing the text would have quickly conveyed to its readers. However, its status nonetheless rests on notions of strict referentiality, as so clearly indicated by the photograph of the hanging tree and the repeated namings of Rhodes. And at the same time as being required to see the novella as both factual and fictional, readers also had to read the text on two levels, regarding its slantwise, and not only its surface, purposes. This required a complicated multi-level set of reading practices, so many of the book's tens of thousands of readers might well have 'missed the point', or rather points, which Schreiner wanted them to get, with comments by reviewers when *Trooper Peter* was published indicating this.

Schreiner's letters point to one key issue here, that perhaps her slantwise purposes would not have been discerned by readers, who could miss the ironies because they became caught up in the factions. However, her letters and their use of many fictive devices indicate what the reviews suggest was another issue for the book's readers as well: that if the novella was as factual as its fictive devices so strongly indicated, then its fictive elements could be found wanting because so obviously fictionalised.



## References

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