

**Unstable Ironies: Narrative Instability in Herman Charles Bosman's
"Oom Schalk Lourens" Series**

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REBECCA DAVIS

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Abstract

This thesis examines the narrative situation within Herman Charles Bosman's "Oom Schalk Lourens" series of stories, focussing on the nature of the relationship between author and narrator. In particular, it seeks to trace the source of the multiple ironies at work in the texts. It has been customary for critics in the past to claim that the irony within the stories stems from Bosman, operating authorially 'above' Oom Schalk. In terms of this theory, Oom Schalk is read as being largely unaware of the inconsistencies and contradictions within his narrative. It is the claim of this thesis, however, that Oom Schalk is the self-aware creator of the texts' ironies much of the time.

Chapter 1 commences with an attempt at defining irony, and provides a brief overview of the history of its deployment within South African literature before discussing the literary genre which Bosman was to exploit as his ironic vehicle: the "oral-style" short story. Chapter 2 examines Wayne C. Booth's notions of "stable" and "unstable" irony: the irony of the Oom Schalk stories has, in the past, been classified as belonging to the former category, but this thesis attempts to show that its inconsistent deployment within the stories consigns it more accurately to the latter. Chapter 3 offers an assessment of the extrinsic contexts relevant to the analysis: the context of the stories' publication, and the likely composition of Bosman's reading public. Chapter 4 begins to examine the distance between implied author and implied narrator in the stories. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 subject stories dealing with the themes of art, race and land to detailed analysis in order to examine the shifting – and progressively, though unevenly, diminishing – distance between Bosman and Oom Schalk. The thesis concludes that the degree to which the ironic distance between author and narrator fluctuates within, and between, the stories, results in a narrative situation which must be classified as fundamentally unstable.

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Introduction

It is a matter of critical consensus these days that Herman Charles Bosman is the finest short story writer produced by South Africa. The last 50 years have proved the validity of Roy Campbell's 1954 prediction that "Bosman's name will one day be a household name in South Africa" (Gray 1986:17), and today it is fair to say that Bosman has succeeded in entrenching his work in the collective South African cultural consciousness to a degree that almost no other South African writer has achieved. This is demonstrated, to give just one example, by the fact that a major South African newspaper¹ runs a weekly column under the pseudonym of one of Bosman's best-known creations: Krisjan Lemmer, the "biggest liar in the Bushveld" ("In The Withaak's Shade", *Mafeking Road* 37).

Bosman's success in securing his place in the South African literary canon is attributable to a number of factors. Critics point to his technical virtuosity in particular: his creation of a unique register, sometimes referred to as "Afrikaans-in-English", to capture the speech patterns of the Afrikaans farming community he chronicles; the skilful crafting of the works, whereby an initial premise is overturned or slyly undermined in the course of the story; the layers of complex irony, whence a great deal of the humour comes. The apparent simplicity of Bosman's short stories is deceptive: it conceals an advanced literary sophistication pointed to, for instance, by his frequent and playful use of metafictional techniques and an explicit unreliability of narrative perspective.

In South African academic circles, Bosman has not been neglected. Work on Bosman began in the 1970s in the form of biographies or memoirs. The first of these were the personal reminiscences of Bernard Sachs (1974) and Aegidius Jean Blignaut (1980), together with Valerie Rosenberg's critically-reviled 1976 biography: but these were all works which failed to contribute particularly usefully to the body of Bosman scholarship. This lacuna was helpfully addressed by the 1986 Stephen Gray-edited full-length work devoted to critical essays, however; and at least ten dissertations focusing on Bosman's short stories appear to have been completed hitherto. Most recently, the project in which 14 volumes of a new "anniversary edition" series of his work were re-issued

¹ *Mail & Guardian*

with new critical introductions by Stephen Gray and Craig Mackenzie served both to spark renewed interest in Bosman's oeuvre, and to give the reader access – for the first time – to the texts of Bosman's short stories in their complete form, and as Bosman himself wished them to appear.

Although much research has been undertaken on Bosman, much remains to be done. The fact that, in particular, no thesis-length work devoted exclusively to the study of irony in his short stories currently exists, is what prompted this research. It is a subject that makes for intriguing study: irony is a literary trope of often astounding complexity; and Bosman's deployment of it, through the mouthpiece of as sly a narrator as Oom Schalk Lourens, provides rich material for analysis.

The type of humour operating in Bosman's Oom Schalk Lourens series is predicated largely on an understanding and appreciation of the irony that underpins it. To state that the Oom Schalk stories are 'ironic' may seem, these days, to point out nothing more than the obvious. To give just one example, the oft-quoted opening to the story "Makapan's Caves" reads as follows:

"Kaffirs?" said Oom Schalk Lourens. "Yes, I know them. And they're all the same. I fear the Almighty, and I respect His works, but I could never understand why He made the kaffir and the rinderpest."

Can any serious critical reader these days take that statement at its racist face-value, in the light of the story to follow: one which adheres to Bosman's characteristic formula of presenting the reader with a denouement which overturns the baseless bigotry of the story's preamble?

One cannot ignore the fact, however, that in the publication and reception history of Bosman's work, this 'ironic' reading has by no means gone uncontested. Stephen Gray cites the example of the edition of Bosman's *Selected Stories*, prescribed for South African schools in the mid-80s, which bowdlerised all references to "kaffirs", "natives", and any other labels for indigenous peoples deemed pejorative. The first lines of "Makapan's Caves" quoted above were found to be so problematic that the story was omitted altogether (2005:40).

Once again, it may seem a matter of considerable ‘obviousness’ to point out that almost any text’s reception and interpretation will vary widely depending on the social and political circumstances of the time. While it may be understandable that in the volatile political climate of 1980s South Africa Bosman’s work might have met with some controversy, it must be noted that in South Africa’s new democratic era, ironic readings of the stories are still the subject of some dispute. In 1997, a South African artist displayed, as political statement, a number of ‘Colonial Tray Cloths’ embroidered with Oom Schalk’s comments on “kaffirs” from the opening of “Makapan’s Caves” as supposedly revealing the ultimate in racist discourse; and as recently as July 1999, a teacher in Cullinan was dismissed for discussing the story “Unto Dust” in class (Gray 2005: 42).

When actor Patrick Mynhardt, famed for his theatrical interpretations of Bosman’s work, recently visited Grahamstown to perform some of the Oom Schalk stories, it was noteworthy that he chose to omit, among other sensitive passages, an excerpt from “The Music-Maker” where Manie Kruger, the musician to whom the story’s title refers, gets up to “kick the kaffir” (*Mafeking Road* 38) as punishment for not raising the curtain swiftly enough.

An uneasy reception of the texts has not been limited to a South African audience. One of the possible reasons why Bosman’s reception overseas has been so muted may be due to a failure on the part of readers to perceive any ironic intention behind the stories, collapsing the vital distance between Bosman and Oom Schalk and seeing Bosman as attempting to operate as an authentic mouthpiece for the Afrikaans community that Schalk describes. One review in *The Spectator* in 1989, for instance, referred to Bosman in its title as “The man who spoke for the Boers” (Gray 2005:42).

It should be noted here, of course, that not all ‘non-ironic’ readings of Bosman’s stories have resulted in ideological revulsion. Margaret Lenta points out that many of Bosman’s readers under apartheid *wanted* to interpret him as uncritically presenting “the Boer of the Golden Age”; they preferred an understanding of Oom Schalk as “perfect, in the sense of being a complete and unchangeable entity, and [saw] their own role as recognising and enjoying a comic masterpiece” (113). Lenta suggests that Lionel Abrahams’ original introductions to the first Bosman collections tacitly encouraged this

perception by underplaying the subversive element to the stories and thereby lending substantiation to the notion that what the reader was experiencing was merely a collection of “charming jokes and traditional tales” (113).

The examples I have cited above would seem to represent failures to offer any kind of ironic reading of the Oom Schalk stories. Exactly how is it, then, that the alert reader knows that when Oom Schalk launches into a racist tirade against “kaffirs”, for instance, Bosman intends us to infer something quite different about his own ideological stance on the matter?

It is a problem that critics of Bosman in the past have not, on the whole, appeared to find particularly worthy of close scrutiny: once the notion that Bosman’s stories were ‘ironic’ was established in literary circles, the case appears to have been closed. When the issue *has* been addressed, it has sometimes been in too simplistic a manner. The South African critic Jean Marquard suggests, for instance, that in the case of Oom Schalk’s opening to “Makapan’s Caves”,

the fact that Oom Schalk collates ‘kaffir’ and ‘rinderpest’ tells us that Bosman thinks differently. The protagonist’s racialism [sic] is almost a guarantee of its absence in the writer. (18)

This is surely insufficient. As intuitively appealing as such an argument may seem, it seems to me that more rigorous evidence is necessary to support our assumptions on this matter, particularly given the fact that, as just discussed, an ironic reading of the stories is by no means uncontested in certain quarters.

In other words, it is necessary to establish with certainty that the irony we appear to discern in the Oom Schalk series is not merely the result of our attempt to account for what may be an irreconcilable gulf between Oom Schalk’s norms and our own. On occasion, warns the American critic Wayne C. Booth, it is not impossible that the reader may mistake ‘straight talk’ for irony simply because he or she is unwilling to accept that the author may hold ideological beliefs that clash so violently with his or her own (81). Evidence must be found to support our intuitive sense that Bosman’s views do not correspond with Oom Schalk’s: we need proof of a self-aware ironic intention on Bosman’s part.

This is the issue I will be investigating over the course of the next few chapters, with specific attention paid to the question of whether it is, as critics have claimed, that one should refer to the type of irony employed by Bosman within the stories as *stable*. My analysis of the ironic situation in the Oom Schalk stories will focus on the examination of three main thematic concerns: issues of race, the notion of ‘art’ and the artist figure, and the treatment of landscape. The selection of these three themes was motivated primarily by the textual tensions and ironic instabilities that accompany the figuring of each, both in the Oom Schalk stories and in Bosman’s journalistic work.

It is as well to remember, in advance, that any study of irony is inevitably hampered by subjectivity: the notion of an objective ‘standard’ of irony is almost unimaginable. Wayne C. Booth offers a valuable caveat to all would-be scholars of the slippery topic of irony:

[It is clear] why irony causes so much trouble. An aggressively intellectual exercise that fuses fact and value, requiring us to construct alternative hierarchies and choose among them; demands that we look down on other men’s follies or sins; floods us with emotion-charged value judgments which claim to be backed by the mind; accuses other men not only of wrong beliefs but of being wrong at their very foundations and blind to what these foundations imply – all of this coupled with a kind of subtlety that cannot be deciphered or “proved” simply by looking closely at the words. (44)

Chapter 1

The concept of irony

1.1 The history of irony in South African literature

The word “irony” did not come into general literary use in English until the early eighteenth century (Muecke 16), and only in the latter part of that century did it begin to take on some of the meanings with which we associate it today. Despite the lack of appropriate terminology, however, irony as a concept, and a literary trope, is centuries-old: it has a significant presence in the writings of the Ancient Greek philosophers, for instance (Muecke 3).

Irony within the South African literary tradition has of course a far shorter history. With the partial exception of the likes of Perceval Gibbon’s *The Vrouw Grobelaar’s Leading Cases* (1905) and Douglas Blackburn’s fictional account of the life of *Prinsloo of Prinsloosdorp* (1899), Herman Charles Bosman’s stories appear to be the first South African literature pervaded by irony. David Wright puts it thus: “Other South African writers, in underlining the viciousness of colour prejudice and so on, range the gamut from moral indignation to sad reasonableness; Bosman laughs” (52).

One potential reason for irony’s relatively low profile within the South African canon is offered by Johan Geertsema, who suggests that the South African reading and writing public has traditionally had a low tolerance of literary ambiguities:

Irony unsettles clear-cut positions and oppositions. Perhaps because it tends to interrogate positions, to interrupt conceptualisations and thus disrupt reductions of all manner of otherness, there seems to be a general suspicion of irony. This would certainly seem to be the case in the South African context.
(3)

Geertsema suggests furthermore that South Africa’s political history produced an environment where literary irony was viewed with some scepticism, and he quotes Zoë Wicomb as referring to irony as “that politically suspect trope” (3). Those writers during

the apartheid era who made use of irony as a means of conveying a veiled critique of the ruling dispensation were sometimes the object of disapproval from other South African writers for what was regarded as a cowardly refusal of the responsibility to deliver a more overtly critical form of social commentary. Jeremy Cronin, who had himself spent time in jail as a political prisoner during apartheid, writes the following in response to Bosman's prison memoir *Cold Stone Jug*, for example:

After a while, I think, the wit begins to pall. Ironic inversions are worked compulsively just once too often. Irony, as Roland Barthes has noted, remains safe, it keeps its distance [...] There are too many knowing winks travelling between narrator and reader. Prison and its ways are held at a comfortable distance. We find ourselves laughing when sometimes we should, perhaps, be asking questions [...] This irony touches upon awkward questions – innocence (what *is* innocence?), justice (whose justice?), prison (is it really rehabilitative?) – but lets them all pass in laughter. (142)

It is certain, however, that Bosman would not have been able to deliver safely what we today must read as a sometimes fairly biting form of condemnation of conservative Afrikaner mores, had he not cloaked it in the seemingly innocuous humour that was his weapon. In addition, it seems likely that Bosman would have enjoyed irony for reasons far more important than the 'safety' it afforded him in terms of the opportunity for subversive statements. From what we know of his life, Bosman appears to have been an irrepressible prankster, for instance.² He would no doubt, then, have derived enormous amusement equally from the prospect of prejudiced Afrikaners finding what they assumed to be an approving affirmation of their norms in his stories, as from the notion that black people and white liberals might recoil in horror from the apparent racism of the stories.

Irony has also been criticised from time to time for its inherent 'elitism'. Kierkegaard wrote that irony "looks down, as it were, on plain and ordinary discourse immediately understood by everyone; it travels in an exclusive incognito" (265); Wayne C. Booth calls it, only half-jokingly, "a game for snobs" (73). Not everyone, in other

² Perhaps the most famous story in this regard is Lionel Abrahams' account of how, while a student at Wits, Bosman "was solemnly awarded the third prize for his entry in a students' poetry competition and then revealed that the successful piece he had submitted was written by Shelley" (Introduction to *A Cask of Jerepigo*, 1964:9).

words, may be able to perform the necessary substitution of the *intended* meaning of a text for the *purported* meaning. This fact may give those who *can* perceive the irony the feeling of belonging to an elite group of similarly-skilled readers. The likelihood is that this aspect of irony would also have appealed to Bosman; this is the same writer, after all, who prefaced his 1931 volume of poems, *The Blue Princess*, with the words: “The mob will not understand these verses. (It would be an insult to me if they pretended that they did)” (Rosenberg 82).

Bosman’s enjoyment of irony is also attributable to his enormous admiration for the work of the North American humorists of the likes of Mark Twain, O. Henry and Stephen Leacock. Leacock’s influence is particularly visible: consider, for instance, a passage like the following, from Leacock’s story “The Marine Excursion of the Knights of Pythias”:

But when they got the boat lowered, it looked like such a frail, clumsy thing as one saw it from the rail above, that the cry was raised: “Women and children first!” For what was the sense, if it should turn out that the boat wouldn’t even hold women and children, of trying to jam a lot of heavy men into it? (51)

It is not hard to imagine Oom Schalk Lourens producing a very similar response to such a situation.³

These three aspects to irony, then – its teasing quality, its elitism and its firmly-established position in the literary tradition of American humour – would quite probably have played a more significant role in Bosman’s choosing to deploy the trope so extensively than any political considerations. Indeed, the reader who seeks evidence of firmly-held political beliefs of whatever kind in Bosman’s work will, inevitably, be disappointed. It seems to have been something of a point of pride for Bosman to avoid being ideologically pigeonholed in any way. In his words:

I am essentially apolitical. I can see life only as a whole. And the moment I come across anybody trying to interpret life in terms of any political, sociological, racial or ideological theory I can feel about that person only that

³ Fittingly, the geographically ‘real’ setting for Bosman’s short stories – the Marico – shares its first two syllables with Leacock’s fictional locale: Mariposa.

he is a lost soul. Life to me is all one thing, incredible in its contrasts, in its paradoxes; and in its squalor and magnificence. (*My Life and Opinions* 9).

1.2 Defining Instrumental Irony

Any scholar of irony faces a difficult task when attempting to start, as seems logical, with a clear definition of the term. Wayne C. Booth notes that “irony has come to stand for so many things that we are in danger of losing it as a useful term altogether” (2). Some critics have attempted to make a case for the fact that *all* literature is essentially ironic; one may certainly speak of a worldview as being almost entirely ironic. Our work is complicated by the fact that what we mean by ‘irony’ today may well be very different from what the word meant in the past. Muecke suggests that

our concept of irony is the cumulative result of our having, from time to time over the centuries, applied the term sometimes intuitively, sometimes heedlessly, sometimes deliberately, to such phenomena as seemed, perhaps mistakenly, to bear a sufficient resemblance to certain other phenomena to which we had already been applying the term. (7)

To illustrate the extent to which the term’s usage has shifted, today it is routine and acceptable, in colloquial use at least, to employ the term “ironic” to describe a situation traditionally more fittingly classified as “coincidental” or just “frustrating”.⁴ Situational irony, however, does not concern us here; it is what the critics refer to as *verbal* or *instrumental* irony which will be the focus of this investigation.

Instrumental irony is, to employ Muecke’s metaphor, “a game for two players”:

⁴ This case of semantic slippage was no doubt exacerbated by the release of one of the best-selling pop music singles of the late 1990s, Alanis Morissette’s “Ironic”, which laid claim to the following kinds of scenarios falling under the ambit of ‘irony’: rain on one’s wedding day; an individual afraid of air travel perishing in an aeroplane crash; a woman discovering that the man of her dreams is already married; encountering a traffic jam when one is late.

The ironist [...] proffers a text but in such a way or in such a context as will stimulate the reader to reject its expressed literal meaning in favour of an unexpressed ‘transliteral’ meaning of contrasting import. (Muecke 39)

Muecke hastens to add, however, that an important element is the fact that the literal meaning, which is to be replaced during the ‘intended’ reading, must be plausible enough to be read as *true*, in order for the irony to be effective. He states:

Interpreting Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* is not a process that entails discarding the literal meaning; it is still there in all its plausibility [...] It is the absence of this feeling that distinguishes irony from what is too heavy or too light to deserve the name. A sarcasm such as ‘You are a nice sort of friend!’ is not for a moment plausible in its literal sense; the tone conveys reproach so strongly that no feeling of contradiction is possible. (45-46)

What gives Bosman’s irony its subversive power, then, is precisely that element of plausibility: the fact that there existed – and still exist – a great many South Africans who would share the professed sentiments of Oom Schalk Lourens’ community and who would, for instance, be similarly prepared to perpetrate acts of violence against black people without finding this in the least problematic.

Muecke refers to the implied author as the “naïf”, and draws a distinction between a “perceptive audience” – that is, one that shares the same customs, values or knowledge as the author, and therefore can be relied upon to access the “transliteral” meaning – and an “imperceptive” audience (40), which is frequently the object of the satirical joke. In the case of Oom Schalk’s stories, then, the imperceptive audience would be composed of those readers who fail to perceive the fact that, for instance, the racism of the Boers is being critiqued through humour rather than endorsed. If those readers are themselves racist Boers, then they are the butt of the satire; if they are offended black people reading what they interpret as prejudice directed at themselves, they remain “imperceptive” but escape being the ironist’s object. The fireside audience present at the occasion of the stories’ original performance by Oom Schalk would also, naturally, fall under the category of “imperceptive”.

Finally, it is important to note that in attempting to interpret irony, we combine linguistic competence with cultural and ideological know-how (Muecke 40). It is not

strictly enough, then, that we be able to perceive that Oom Schalk's racist credo offends our instinctive belief in what *we* feel to be the case about issues of race; it is also necessary that we have the linguistic savvy to take notice of authorial clues pointing, textually, to the presence of irony: malapropisms, clashes of style, and the like.

One further note on irony's ever-shifting denotation: Muecke suggests that although in the post-Romantic nineteenth century the prevailing concept of irony in literary circles was that of "nihilistic irony", the twentieth century produced a dominant type of literary irony that was "relativistic and even non-committal". In support of this, Muecke quotes Samuel Hynes's definition of irony as

a view of life which recognized that experience is open to multiple interpretations, of which no *one* is simply right, and that the co-existence of incongruities is part of the structure of existence. (Muecke 31)

These are useful words to bear in mind as we begin to tackle the numerous instabilities and ambiguities presented by Bosman's ironic work, for it is necessary to accept from the start that 'closed' answers or interpretations may not be possible.

1.3 Irony in the Oom Schalk series

A useful starting point for an investigation of the nature of the irony in the Oom Schalk series is an examination of the literary tradition within which Bosman appears to be operating. Wayne C. Booth suggests that the precise fixing of irony is dependent largely on an agreement between author and reader on "their common experience of literary genres" (100). It is generally when we are apprised of the 'rules' of the literary form to which the text we are reading ostensibly belongs that we are able, by comparison with the standard formula, to perceive the nature of its subversion. This is, of course, the manner in which all parody operates. Our undertaking not to take Oom Schalk at face-value, then, is partially reliant on our familiarity with the conventions of the literary genre within which Bosman works. For this reason, then, a brief discussion of the genre in question will be helpful.

1.4 The oral-style short story

The literary formula employed by Bosman in his Oom Schalk series is generally termed the ‘fireside tale’, or oral-style short story. It is the form that dominated South African short fiction in the nineteenth century, with its published origins dating back to A.W. Drayson’s *Tales at the Outspan* (1862). The form has three main features: a central narrative persona recounting stories largely based on his or her own experience; an ‘oral’ discourse; and the presence of an audience, which may be implied or “overt” (Rimmon-Kenan 105).

Craig MacKenzie (1996) gives a comprehensive account of the form’s development in South African literary history, and it is not my intention here to trace Bosman’s literary antecedents in this regard. It is necessary, however, to note some of the adaptations Bosman made to the form to enable a far more complex narrative structure, allowing for ample opportunities for the deployment of irony.

First, previous exponents of the South African fireside tale tended to employ clumsy and laborious narrative frames. MacKenzie points to Percy KitzPatrick’s “The Outspan” as an example of a story which exemplifies this. Here, the unnamed first-person narrator provides the main frame, setting the scene by the campfire and introducing the characters; one of these begins to recount an anecdote which is taken over by another speaker, the narrative all the while being interspersed with interruptions from other interlocutors. The effect, in MacKenzie’s view, is that of “bad stage-management” (59).

The Oom Schalk stories, by contrast, drastically whittle down the narrative frame. Only one narrative voice features – that of Oom Schalk Lourens – and explicit authorial intervention is limited exclusively to the “Oom Schalk Lourens said” which punctuates each story’s prefatory statement. Some stories – “Unto Dust”, for instance – lack even this indicator of an authorial presence.

In the oral-style literary form, this authorial marker is a vital tool because it immediately establishes a separation between author and storyteller. Booth points out that this distance may be moral (in the case, for instance, of the separation between the character of Jason Compson and the author, William Faulkner, in *The Sound and the Fury*); it may be intellectual (as in the divide between Mark Twain and Huckleberry

Finn); and, most obviously, it may be physical or temporal (Booth 156). In the case of the Oom Schalk series, as will be seen, all three types of distance appear in differing degrees at different times.

This separation between author and storyteller sets up the ‘dialogic’ – or ‘two-voiced’ – narrative structure that often enables the presence of irony, and is the key feature of the literary form that Eichenbaum terms the “parodistic *skaz* narrative”. MacKenzie explains it thus:

Parodistic *skaz* introduces a storyteller figure precisely because of the individual attributes, attitudes and intonations that he or she brings to the story. These are distinct from the author’s own voice and attitudes and a dialogic structure is therefore set up in which the author’s intention is ‘refracted’ through the storyteller. (8)

Bosman’s stories are more complex in this regard, however, in that although this dialogic structure is established from the story’s outset, the distance between author and narrator is often difficult to gauge and not consistent throughout. This is a matter I will deal with in some detail in subsequent chapters.

Similarly difficult to assess is the distance between Oom Schalk and his assembled ‘fireside’ audience, given that they are never granted a voice. The presence of Oom Schalk’s listeners can be inferred solely through devices like the opening to “Makapan’s Caves”: “‘Kaffirs?’ (said Oom Schalk Lourens). ‘Yes, I know them’” (*Mafeking Road* 64), which appears to be a response to a comment or previous anecdote from the assembled group. Otherwise, the presence of an audience is established only through the use of the vocative “you” – “You’ll see that grave by the side of the road as you go to Ramoutsa, Oom Schalk Lourens said” (“Ramoutsa Road”, *Seed-time and Harvest* 31) – or through the occasional reminder of the physical proximity of the group: “Even now, as I am telling you this story, I am expecting you to wink at me, like Krisjan Lemmer did” (“In the Withaak’s Shade”, *Mafeking Road* 38).⁵

⁵ The only evidence of an interaction with any interlocutor in the entire Oom Schalk series, in fact, is found in the story “Bushveld Romance”, which features a farmer called Stoffel Lemmer, whose weakness lies in believing that every woman he meets is in love with him. Lemmer ardently reciprocates their assumed affection, but is never able to express it to the woman in question: in the case, the new teacher in the Marico, Minnie Bonthuys. Oom Schalk tells the story of Stoffel’s paralysing situation in a characteristically

The virtual elision of the ‘fireside’ audience has two consequences. Most importantly, it automatically renders the relationship between author and narrator more nuanced and complex, as shall be further discussed. The second effect of the audience’s elision is simply to add to the economy with which Bosman sets his scene. This is heightened by the use, without explanation or contextualisation, of geographical and historical allusions with which the audience is assumed to be familiar. Closely linked to this is another framing refinement which Bosman brings to the fireside tale: the fact that the first published story of the series – “Makapan’s Caves” – makes no attempt to offer the reader any more information about setting or characters than do the subsequent stories. This is in marked contrast to some of the earlier South African examples of the form, like Perceval Gibbon’s “Vrouw Grobelaar” series (1905), which constructs a coherently-developed story cycle as the series unfolds. Gibbon begins by introducing the community members and surroundings in a detailed manner and then gradually reduces this frame as the cycle proceeds, the reader being assumed to have developed a familiarity with the storyteller and her community. In the Oom Schalk series, our familiarity with Oom Schalk Lourens and his milieu is already presumed from the outset, eliminating at once any distracting authorial intervention, and creating the effect of a more intimate, confessional mode of narrative.

Other short-story cycle writers tend to introduce a stock set of characters, too; another element from which Bosman’s narrative diverges. There is almost no repetition of mention of specific characters, and when characters *do* recur, it is sometimes in a seemingly inconsistent manner. To illustrate this: the character of Krisjan Lemmer first appears in an early story called “The Gramophone”, where it is revealed – in a typically elliptical fashion, relying on much reader inference – that he murders his wife Susannah. Krisjan Lemmer proceeds to become something of a staple in the Schalk series, infamous for being “the biggest liar in the Bushveld” (“In The Withaak’s Shade”, *Mafeking Road* 37), but there is no mention in later stories of his murderous past; nor, apparently, is there

rambling and tangential manner; and it is only at the story’s end that he gives the answer to an implied question from the group – “What’s that? Did he ever tell her?” (*Seed-time and Harvest* 56). The technique is suspensefully effective here, of course, because the reader shares the implied audience’s eagerness to learn the answer; and the implication is that without this prompt, Schalk – in his infuriatingly casual way – might not have revealed the crux of the story: that Minnie *did* love Stoffel all along.

any kind of subsequent retribution for the murder of his wife, which seems an odd omission.⁶ This exception aside, Bosman's refusal to restrict himself to a specific 'cast' of characters possibly suggests that the figures presented are interchangeable Marico 'types'; but it is more likely that his avoidance of this technique is due to the fact that reintroducing characters or events from past stories would require the kind of contextualisation that Oom Schalk's economical narrative rejects.

Another aspect of Bosman's style which diverges from the formal norms of the fireside tale, as MacKenzie points out, is the foregrounding of narrative technique which occurs so often in the Oom Schalk series (1999:152). Metatextual commentary is largely absent from the work of previous exponents of this narrative form, although here the tales of Aegidius Jean Blignaut's narrator, "Ruiter", prove the exception.⁷

Oom Schalk's metafictional statements are articulated through four main forms. The first of these is simply his boasting about his own storytelling prowess – the fact that he is the (self-appointed) best storyteller in the Marico,⁸ something that he frequently reminds his audience of: "They all know that I can tell stories better than anyone else. Much better" ("Splendours from Ramoutsa", *Mafeking Road* 139).

The second type of self-reflexive statement Schalk makes takes the form of observations and criticisms about narrative structure and performance. Schalk is, for instance, a master in the art of unsettling what is expected in terms of narrative "acceleration" and "deceleration". It is customary for the most important information in a story to be imparted in most detail ("decelerated"), while the trivial details are dealt with

⁶ Perhaps it is simply the case that Schalk is referring to two separate Marico farmers with the same name; as unlikely as this seems, one notes that two distinctly different 'Francina Malherbes' feature: eponymously in "Francina Malherbe", and also in "Dream by the Blue-Gums". This can most plausibly be attributed to error or sloppiness on Bosman's part.

⁷An example of this is found in the opening to "Dead End Road", where Ruiter regrets his structural approach to the story he has just begun to tell:

He shook his head. For he had lost his audience through a faulty start. He should have brought in the lion first thing. (*Dead End Road* 15)

⁸ This boast is lent credence by means of comparison with our exposure to another notorious Marico raconteur in "The Love Potion". In the character of Krisjan Cordier we are presented with a caricature of the Marico farmer who loves to tell his long and tedious life story (a type that Bosman must have encountered often during his time in the Marico). This is a portrait absurdly exaggerated for humorous effect, as it takes Cordier two weeks to tell of his life up to the age of five; we are clearly intended to draw an unfavourable contrast with Schalk's own succinct style.

hastily (“accelerated”) (Rimmon-Kenan 56). Occasionally, however, this hierarchy may be turned on its head for dramatic effect: “the effect of shock or irony is produced by summing up briefly the most central event and rendering trivial events in detail” (Rimmon-Kenan 56). Rimmon-Kenan cites the examples of Chekhov’s “Sleepy”, where “the desperate climactic act [...] is told very briefly in a subordinate clause”, and Kleist’s “The Marquise of O”, where “the most crucial moment in the story is elided in the text” (56); but this is one of Schalk’s favourite narrative tricks, too, and he expounds upon it most famously in the story “Mafeking Road”.

In this story, commenting on Floris van Barnevelt’s tragic account of his son Stephanus’ death, he observes:

For it is not the story that counts. What matters is the way you tell it. The important thing is to know just at what moment you must knock out your pipe on your veldskoen, and at what stage of the story you must start talking about the School Committee at Drogevelei. Another necessary thing is to know what part of the story to leave out. (*Mafeking Road* 53)

The irony of this observation, as MacKenzie (1999:153) points out, is that in the particular case of Floris’ story, the “important thing” actually has nothing to do with structure or performance, and everything to do with content: the fact – which the reader is required to infer from Schalk’s elliptical retelling, which ‘corrects’ Floris’ original error by eliding this detail – that Floris van Barnvelt kills his own son to prevent him from surrendering to the British.

Oom Schalk’s belief that the quality of the oral performance of a story is as critical as its content is evinced in numerous other stories. In “Peaches Ripening in the Sun”, for instance, he reveals himself to be acutely conscious of the timing and delivery of a story’s denouement:

The story of the Transvaal was at that place where you clear your throat before saying which of the two men the girl finally married. Or whether it was the cattle smuggler or the Sunday-school superintendent that stole the money. Or whether it was a real ghost or just her uncle with a sheet around him that Lettie van Zyl saw at the drift. (*Unto Dust* 126)

The third type of metafictional comment favoured by Oom Schalk is explicitly on the matter of content; and, specifically, on his preference for local subject matter. This is most clearly expressed in “Splendours from Ramoutsa”. The story deals with the Indian who runs the shop at Ramoutsa, who attempts – in Oom Schalk’s undoubtedly paranoid view, at least – to set himself up as a rival storyteller. The Marico residents are initially seduced by the Indian’s stories because they contain such exotic details: princesses, elephants, temples, and the like. Several of the farmers start hinting to Oom Schalk that he should consider incorporating such elements into his stories, but he refuses to, in a typically pragmatic fashion:

I pointed out that there was no sense in my trying to tell people about kings and princes and trained elephants, and so on, when I didn’t know anything about them or what they were supposed to do even. (*Mafeking Road* 141)

His refusal is vindicated by the fact that people soon tire of the Indian’s stories, returning to Oom Schalk’s seemingly more prosaic Marico tales.

At the peak of the Indian’s storytelling popularity, Schalk tries to allay his own fears by convincing himself that his insight into human nature is a far more critical factor than the Indian’s fancy narrative trappings:

The Indian could tell all the stories he wanted to about the princess riding around on an elephant. For there was one thing that I knew I could always do better than the Indian. Just a few words, and without ever talking about the princess, I would be able to let people know, subtly, what was in her heart. And this was more important than the palaces and the temples and the elephants with gold ornaments on their feet. (141)

He describes the Indian’s stories later as “empty discourse” (142): like a borehole in time of drought (the ‘leitmotif’ around which “Splendours from Ramoutsa” is constructed), there is nothing at their core. What lends Oom Schalk’s stories more substance, and consequently more lasting appeal, is the fact that they are built on, and sustained by, profound human understanding and observation.

This is only partly it, however, as the subsequent events of the story show. Krisjan Geel, a young farmer who is one of the Indian’s main admirers, is initially drawn to the

Indian's stories because they offer an enticing glimpse into a world of exoticism and romance, seemingly entirely antithetical to the prosaic way of life in the Marico. Krisjan feels that – unlike in India, and other more glamorous milieux – the mundanities of Marico life preclude excitement and romance:

A young man had no chance, really, in the Marico. What with the droughts, and the miltsiek, and the mosquitoes buzzing around so that you couldn't sleep at night. (143)

But Krisjan is wrong: what the story's ending reveals is that beautiful young Lettie Viljoen is in love with him, and sits daily waiting for Krisjan at the borehole; but because she is not dressed like the princess in the Indian's stories, Krisjan fails to notice her. A love affair every bit as passionate and stirring as those in the Indian's stories is available to him in the Marico, in reality, but Krisjan's frustrating blindness prevents him from perceiving this. Schalk, though, has been vindicated in his choice of purely 'local' subject matter, which is revealed to offer as much potential for excitement and intrigue as that from any other setting.⁹

"Splendours from Ramoutsa" thus appears to embrace a far larger metafictional message than may initially be assumed: Bosman clearly intended this story to stand as a kind of allegory for his own literary project. Bosman uses Oom Schalk here as a mouthpiece to justify his own choice of a limited and seemingly parochial setting and range of character types. Just as Oom Schalk refuses to 'borrow' some of the Indian's characters and imagery to spice up his stories, Bosman rejects the mindless aping of other literary heritages in favour of his stated commitment to the capturing of a uniquely, indigenously South African sense of identity and culture. In a piece for *The South African Opinion* entitled "An Indigenous South African Culture is Unfolding", he writes: "There is nothing more exotic than what is lying just at hand" (*A Cask of Jerepigo* 51): an apt summation of the 'moral' of "Splendours from Ramoutsa".

⁹ Compare, here, a very similar sentiment advanced by the narrator of Stephen Leacock's story "The Mariposa Bank Mystery":

There is no need really to mention all these details. They are only of interest as showing how sometimes a bank teller in a corded smoking jacket and stockinged feet may be turned into such a hero as even the Mariposa girls might dream about. (*Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* 116)

The fourth type of metafictional comment present in the Oom Schalk series consists of observations about the nature and purpose of storytelling itself. “I wonder why people listen to stories” (139), Schalk muses at the opening to “Splendours from Ramoutsas”, and suggests firstly that the most obvious motivation is simple boredom, or procrastination:

Because then he can sit on the stoep and smoke his pipe and drink coffee, while I am talking, so that my story keeps him from having to go to the borehole, in the hot sun, to pump water for his cattle. (160)

He goes on to observe, however, that there are times when people come to him for stories to fill a different, more profound need: “And I think that these reasons are deeper than any stories and deeper than the water in the boreholes when there is drought” (139). In the case of Krisjan Geel, the young man so much in thrall to the Indian’s exotic tales, for instance, his ‘deeper reason’ is revealed to be his need for vicarious escape into another world to compensate for the perceived banality of his everyday existence.

In all the ways adumbrated above, then, Bosman adapted the form of the fireside tale to suit his more sophisticated ironic purpose. His use of the format as a vehicle for satire and social commentary had, with the partial exception of Blignaut’s “Ruiter” stories, without precedent. What makes the fireside tale so suitable in this regard is the fact that the storyteller is typically located firmly at the centre of the depicted community, speaking to, from and within it. Although we have occasional cause to doubt the strict veracity of Oom Schalk’s tales – when prompted, for instance, by the scepticism of other farmers in “In the Withaak’s Shade”, where the community refuses to believe his account of his communion with a leopard – and although we have substantial evidence that he is not universally liked or trusted by his peers, we never doubt that he has an intimate knowledge or understanding of his milieu. His ‘authentic’ insider status is what renders his critique of Marico norms so incisive.

Chapter 2

Stable vs. Unstable Irony

I would now like to turn to a more detailed analysis of the precise nature of the irony at work in the Oom Schalk series. Jean Marquard suggests that the most accurate template to apply in an analysis of the Oom Schalk stories is Wayne C. Booth's concept of "stable irony" (18). Booth offers as his prototypical example of stable irony the famous opening line of *Pride and Prejudice*:

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

What makes this irony so fundamentally "stable"? Booth answers:

The [meaning is] hidden, but when [it is] discovered by the proper reader [it is] firm as a rock. Regardless of how much difference may be revealed in peripheral associations, the central irony is read identically by every qualified reader. It is simply unthinkable that later on we will discover that Jane Austen [...] really believe[s] what those words, on their surface, "say". (235)

2.1 The markers of stable irony

Booth suggests that "stable irony" is identifiable by four basic characteristics.

First, it is *intended*: "deliberately created by human beings to be heard or read or understood with some precision by other human beings" (Booth 5). In other words, as mentioned previously, we must ensure that the irony we read in the Oom Schalk series has been constructed with conscious awareness by Bosman for the reader to unpack.

Secondly, the irony must be *covert*: "intended to be reconstructed with meanings different from those on the surface" (Booth 6). The surface meaning of many of Oom Schalk's statements, for instance, is unambiguous racism. The covertness of the *intended* meaning is pointed to by the many mis-readings of the stories cited earlier; and it is this

covert element to irony that lends it its subversive power as a destabilising literary device.

Thirdly, the irony must be *stable*, or *fixed*, in that “once a reconstruction of meaning has been made, the reader is not then invited to undermine it with further demolitions and reconstructions”; and fourthly, it is *finite* in application: “the reconstructed meanings are in some sense local, limited” (Booth 6). If we are to accept this as a template for analysis of the Schalk stories, then, we must accept that Bosman intended one reading to be more ‘correct’ than any others. Our task is to discover what that reading may be.

Booth proceeds to suggest various ‘clues’ we should be alert to when seeking the presence of irony. The first of these he lists as “straightforward warnings in the author’s own voice” (53); an example of which would be Vladimir Nabokov’s introduction to *Lolita*, in which he makes explicit the distance between narrator and author: “My creature Humbert is a foreigner and an anarchist, and there are many things, beside nymphets, in which I disagree with him” (Booth 55). In the Oom Schalk series, as mentioned earlier, the dialogic structure is enabled solely by the distinction between author and narrator made evident in the prefatory clause to each story’s opening statement: “Oom Schalk said”. As slight as this marker of a separate authorial presence is, its inclusion must be read as Bosman’s intention to distance himself in some way from the narrating voice. If Bosman’s intellectual and ideological position correlated exactly with Schalk’s, this would seem unnecessary.

A second indicator of the presence of irony is what Booth terms “known error proclaimed”, which he defines as occurring when a speaker “betrays ignorance or foolishness that is simply incredible”. In this case, he suggests, the assumption can be made that “the author, in contrast, knows what he is doing” (57). When Schalk reveals his ignorance of both the electric chair and the English national anthem, in the following passage from “Ox-wagons on Trek”, it would be absurd to suggest that Bosman shares this ignorance:

But he was a good-looking young man, and his sweetheart was very sorry for him when they took him into a small room and fastened him down on to a sort of chair.

I can't tell what they did that for. All I know is that I have been a Boer War prisoner at St. Helena, and they never gave me a chair to sit on. Only a long wooden bench that I had to scrub once a week.

Anyway I don't know what happened to the young man after that, because he was still sitting in that chair when the band started playing an English hymn about King George, and everybody stood up. (*Mafeking Road* 39-40)

If we accept that there is a clear distinction here between the author's intellectual position and that of the narrator, it is easier for us to assume a comparable ideological gap between author and narrator at certain other points.

Booth's third clue to irony takes the form of a conflict of facts within the text; in which case, he suggests, the ordering of the conflicting facts will frequently point to which one the author intends us to give primacy: "the probability is that the final voice will triumph" (61). This is particularly significant in terms of the characteristic structure of an Oom Schalk story, where Schalk begins with a seemingly clearcut affirmation of the norms of the bigoted white Marico community, as best evinced by the opening to the story "Makapan's Caves", but proceeds to relate an anecdote which searingly exposes the absurdity of such beliefs. In terms of Booth's theory, then, the fact that Schalk's stories *end* on a note that overturns the initial premise suggests that it is this final conclusion that we are intended to endorse, whilst now repudiating the opening credo.

The fourth indicator of irony that Booth delineates is the presence of any kind of clashes of style within the work (67). To illustrate this, consider Schalk's brusque and dismissive opening statement in "The Rooinek", namely: "Rooineks are queer" (*Mafeking Road* 125); an opinion subsequently expanded on by the addition of further evidence of their contemptible 'queerness' as the story unfolds: "When he stepped over a thorn-bush we saw that he had got socks on. Therefore we knew that he was an Englishman" (128). Or

[The Englishman] told us that he had bought the farm next to Gerhardus Grobbelaar and that he didn't know much about sheep and cattle and mealies, but he had bought a few books on farming, and he was going to learn all he could out of them. When he said that I looked away towards the poort. I didn't want him to see that I was laughing. (147)

Now compare those maliciously humorous expositions of the absurdity of the dandified Englishman with the tragic, lyrical description of the man at the story's end, where he perishes while trying to protect an Afrikaner child:

He probably thought, up to the moment when he died, that he was carrying the child. For, when we lifted his body, we found, still clasped in his dead and rigid arms, a few old rags and a child's clothes.

It seemed to us that the wind that always stirs in the Kalahari blew very quietly and softly that morning.

Yes, the wind blew very gently. (138)

Although to term this stylistic shift a *clash* of styles is perhaps a little extreme, the lyricism of the closing passage, in contrast with the mocking tone of the opening, suggests a clear disparity between the emotion expressed towards the subject at the story's beginning and at its end.

Booth's final clue to the presence of irony is possibly the most important and the most problematic. We are alerted to the presence of irony, he suggests, whenever we notice "an unmistakable conflict between the beliefs expressed and the beliefs we hold *and suspect the author of holding*" (73). This is troublesome firstly because it presupposes a uniformity of norms and ideologies which would certainly not be the case among, for instance, the South African reading public; and secondly because it is predicated upon our ability to uncover the author's ideological position: an idea unfashionable in particular among proponents of post-structuralist notions of the 'Death of the Author'.

Recognising that this 'test' may lead may lead to multiple conflicting interpretations, Booth elaborates:

If someone disputes our reading, we are faced with a question that is clearly both critical and historical: what is a convincing reading of this line in context, and what was a given man [sic] likely to believe at a given time? (75)

Booth instructs us to consider two questions in attempting to answer this. First,

What has been my past experience with this moral or intellectual position? [...] If almost everyone I know would reject either the main point or the

arguments advanced for it, then the likelihood of irony is greatly increased.
(79)

When considering, for instance, the ‘seriousness’ of the racist sentiments Oom Schalk expresses, however, this test is clearly insufficient; and, again, hopelessly subjective.

The second question we must consider, then, is: “What do I know about the beliefs of the man signing his name to this piece? [...] Is he, secondly, likely to use irony?” (Booth 80). Booth notes that the answer to the latter question is inconclusive on its own: “to know that [the author] is often ironic cannot in itself settle whether he is ironic *here*” (81). In attempting to answer the former question, however, we are fortunate, in the case of Bosman, to have at our disposal a large body of journalistic pieces and editorials to scrutinise for clarification of the author’s own ideological position. Here we find some evidence to support the notion, for instance, that Bosman held reasonably liberal, if rather romanticised, views on the race issue for his time. This is a matter I shall return to shortly. The point is, however, that some degree of conflict is evident between what we know of Oom Schalk’s professed ideologies and what we know of Bosman’s: a good indicator of the presence of irony.

Having established with reasonable certainty, then, that there are ironic aspects to the Oom Schalk stories, the question remains whether the type of irony present can be defined as *stable*, as critics have claimed; and in order to assess this, a brief survey of the other end of the ironic spectrum is necessary.

2.2 Defining unstable irony

Wayne C. Booth defines *unstable* irony as existing when

the truth asserted or implied is that no stable reconstruction can be made out of the ruins revealed through the irony. The author – insofar as we can discover him [sic], and he is often very remote indeed – refuses to declare himself, however subtly, *for* any stable proposition, even the opposite of whatever proposition his irony vigorously denies. (240)

Into this category, Booth suggests, falls the work of Samuel Beckett; and he warns against “poison[ing] our reading experience” by “insisting on literal translation when the whole point is to heighten instabilities” (277). “To insist that the ‘Godot’ Beckett’s characters wait for must or must not be God,” Booth asserts, “is to commit a kind of pedantry” (277).

Obviously, Bosman is no Beckett, and the Oom Schalk stories can in no way be classified as episodes in some kind of nihilistically ironic existential farce. That there are certain *fixed* meanings to be reconstructed from the stories is indisputable. A plausible case cannot be made, for instance, for a reading of “Makapan’s Caves” in which the primary ‘meaning’ or ‘moral’ is not the racial hypocrisy of Oom Schalk’s community. The irony of the fact that it is the “good kaffir”, Nongaas, whom Oom Schalk accidentally kills, is the irony that anchors the story as a whole; and the reader who puts down “Makapan’s Caves” still nodding his or her head in agreement with Oom Schalk’s introductory deterministically-racist explanation of “kaffir” character has failed to perceive Bosman’s authorial intention.

One cannot, then, classify the Oom Schalk stories in terms of Booth’s definition of unstable irony. I would argue, however, that there is still a gulf of instability that separates the Oom Schalk stories’ ironies from those of the lines from *Pride and Prejudice* quoted above, for a number of reasons.

The first of these is the fact, as hinted at earlier, that the instability of the narrative situation makes it almost impossible to trace the irony back to either the narrator or the implied author with any certainty. Oom Schalk Lourens is a classic ‘unreliable narrator’, his unreliability stemming from his “limited knowledge, his personal involvement, and his problematic value-scheme” (Rimmon-Kenan 101). The nature of his relationship with the implied author, in terms of the degree to which they share ironies and/or norms, cannot be determined with any certainty at almost any point – a matter I shall analyse in some detail in the chapters to follow.

The second reason why the Oom Schalk stories’ ironies must surely be classified as far less stable than those of *Pride and Prejudice* is because Booth’s fifth clue to irony – the question “what is a convincing reading of this line in context?” – cannot be answered with any certainty, given South Africa’s political history. A sentence like “I

fear the Almighty, and I respect His works, but I could never understand why He made the kaffir and the rinderpest” (“Makapan’s Caves” 61) may seem to us to be the ultimate in ludicrously racist discourse today, but as I will go on to argue, it might not have struck a reader of Bosman in 1930s South Africa as particularly jarring. And our use of extrinsic contexts in this kind of decision-making can only assist us up to a point: so inconsistent was Bosman in his tackling of certain themes in his journalistic work, for instance, that it is sometimes very difficult to pin down what may be regarded as his fixed, sincere opinion on a matter.

In the chapters that follow, then, I will attempt to show that the inconsistent distances among the narrator, the author, and the reader, and the internal contradictions evident in the handling of certain topics, make the classification of “stable irony”, in the sense in which it is attached by Booth to a work like *Pride and Prejudice*, an inadequate template in the analysis of the Oom Schalk stories.

Chapter 3

Extrinsic Contexts

Booth emphasises the fact that the conscientious student of irony cannot afford to ignore any extrinsic contexts available to him or her, in terms of the light they may help to shed on the norms of the text's implied author. Of particular interest to us, in this regard, is how Bosman constructed his reading public. Almost all of the Oom Schalk stories appeared initially in one of three or four publications; if we are able to determine what kind of reader was drawn to these kinds of publications, we may be able to infer what kind of response Bosman was likely to have expected from them.

3.1 Context of publication

The Oom Schalk stories initially appeared in a publication called *The Touleier*, launched in 1930 by Bosman and his partner-in-crime (often quite literally) Aegidius Jean Blignaut. *The Touleier* was “a full-blown literary review” (Mackenzie 2003:16) which lasted for four “solid and impressive” issues (Gray 2004:14). Its first editorial claimed that “*The Touleier* will burn like a storm-lamp through the darkness of the night” (Gray 1986:6) – although the tone seems likely to be somewhat tongue-in-cheek. Characteristically, however, Bosman and Blignaut did not shy away from controversial subject matter. The first edition included a psychologist's endorsement of Havelock Ellis' defence of homosexual practices (Gray 2005:151); other ‘cutting-edge’ (for the time) pieces included a survey of “American Negro Poetry”. In terms of fictional contributions, Blignaut's *Ruiter* pieces featured side-by-side with the early Oom Schalk stories.

The Touleier's impact was not inconsiderable: Gray suggests that not only did the journal's coverage of theatre and cinema “set a new standard in South African criticism” (2005:162), but *The Touleier* also, more significantly, succeeded in “haul[ing] the literary centre of South Africa away from the Cape and Natal, up to the more cosmopolitan Rand, modernising it in one go” (2005:162).

What followed *The Toulleier*, however, is to be taken less seriously. The Oom Schalk stories next appeared in a series of ‘scandal-sheets’, again the product of the Blignaut-Bosman collaboration, published on-and-off in the years after 1931. The first of these, *The New L.S.D.*, featured the following kind of sensational headlines: “Joburg’s Filthy Bosses: Sexual Perverts”; “Zulu Pimps for White Women – Dirty Durban”; “Black Snobs under White Girls’ Dresses” (Gray 2005:165). *The New Sjambok*, which ran simultaneously, was “an infamous vehicle for mere scandals and smear campaigns” (Gray 2005:166).

The intention of Bosman and Blignaut seems to have been to cause as much offence as possible to as wide a range of people as possible. Gray relates the following anecdote by way of illustration:

When they published a letter on 1 December, 1931, from Ismail Kadjee of Dullstroom, explaining the origins of the Tamil word for the working labourer (‘coolie’) and requesting them not to use it, as it had become a term to express opprobrium in South Africa, Blignaut replied with this headline in *The New L.S.D.*: ‘We Don’t Want Our Girls Ravished by Coolies.’ (2005:168)

Despite their desire to shock, then, one can certainly not claim that these scandal-sheets espoused particularly progressive views on race; although perhaps it is fair to say that they were simply *as* insulting to non-whites as to whites. Some of their jibes seem to have contained an unpalatably malicious racial edge, however. When Oswald Pirow ordered an old friend of Blignaut and Bosman’s, Eddie Roux, out of Durban for organising trade unions, for example, Bosman, who was exceptionally jealous of Roux’s ladies’-man ways, wrote the following:

What I feel about Roux is that his mind stopped developing at a comparatively early age, with the result that he found himself unable to compete on an equal footing with white men, whose intellects take longer to mature. That’s why he hangs round niggers. In that way his mental inferiority is rendered less conspicuous. (Gray 2005:183)

At other points, their projects seem to have had a disturbingly white-supremacist dimension. One short-lived paper – it ran for just three editions – was called *The White*

Man, for instance, and cited its policy as aiming “to make South Africa fit for white men and women to live in” (Gray 2005:174).

The public seems to have responded to the scandal-sheets with enthusiasm, however; although this is difficult to assess reliably, given that both Blignaut and Bosman were in the habit of exaggerating their circulation figures for the purposes of defending libel suits and the like. Sales of twenty thousand per week are claimed for the scandal-sheets, which were distributed country-wide (Rosenberg 90).

Ultimately, Gray asserts,

This extraordinary 1930’s combined [between Blignaut and Bosman] effort at creating an alternative culture in English-speaking South Africa is a monument to their grit, mixed with a kind of suicidal folly. Despite the dire economic circumstances of the Great Depression, Blignaut and Bosman flew their colours grandly. Art Deco was to be the style (a blend of Romantic Revival and Hollywood, asserting Dominion independence). They scoured the gutters to reach the stars. They intended to be terribly talented, salacious, innovative and offensive – in other words, your classic artistic rebels, both with an indelible grudge against the system. (Gray 2004:15)

The South African Opinion, which followed in 1934, was a more ‘highbrow’ publication. Gray describes it as an “embattled, courageous monthly”, carrying reviews of South African politics and the arts in a New York Times-type vein, as well as “lifted material on larger topical and cultural issues” by the likes of Aldous Huxley, André Gide, and Jean-Paul Sartre (2002:16). It ran a “three-pronged campaign” to fight fascism and anti-semitism, encourage Smuts supporters and “cultivate South African nativism in the field of the arts”. In short, Gray suggests, *The South African Opinion*

saw to it that it was the seedbed of that part of the post-war scene which used English as its medium, was resolutely against the colour-bar and chose to be internationalist in approach. (2002:17)

3.2 Bosman's reading public

Any scholar attempting to investigate the reception history of Bosman's work is hampered by the fact that there exists very little information on this subject from the original period of the stories' publications.

Margaret Lenta suggests – without offering any empirical 'proof', however – that “the majority of readers under apartheid remained unaware that they were reading their own prejudices into the stories” (115); and that the attitude of many South African whites to Bosman's stories was “uncomprehendingly approving” (115), in terms of the fact that in Oom Schalk and his community's behaviour and ideals they found a comforting echo of their own.

It seems likely, however, that certain sections of the Afrikaans reading community of the time were insulted by his portrayal of the rural Afrikaners. Snyman, in reference to Bosman's similarly ironic Afrikaans stories, notes that:

in framing the Afrikaans short stories in the same way as their English equivalents, Bosman implicitly made assumptions about the maturity and objective distance of his Afrikaans reader – assumptions that were not always received as a compliment. The heightened 'effectiveness' of his irony in Afrikaans turns out, in some cases, to be *too* effective for comfort. (27)

Reports differ on the response of those residents of the real-life Marico who read Bosman's caricatured view of their community. David Goldblatt, visiting the Marico years after Bosman's death, made the following claim based on his interviews with the area's inhabitants:

In answer to my question, Did he write truthfully of life in the bushveld? they would say invariably, “Ja, dit was ons.” They seemed neither flattered nor incensed at having their own families' names and characters thus enlarged upon. (54)

Valerie Rosenberg's research in the region produced similar results to Goldblatt's in that she, too, found that Bosman had remained astonishingly faithful to the 'real-life' details of the Marico. The place names were real, she reported; she authenticated various

other details of setting, such as the Indian shop at Ramoutsa – in reality an establishment called ‘Mohammed’s Cash Store’; the characters’ names, she found, *were* those of local inhabitants. Rosenberg even goes so far as to print a photograph of the ‘original’ Oom Schalk Lourens figure – although, as Gray points out, this identity was to be claimed by a number of different ‘Ooms’ over the years (2005:86).

Where Rosenberg’s account differs interestingly from Goldblatt’s, however, is in her report of the inhabitants’ reaction to their literary immortalisation:

Some of those among whom he lived during the six months he spent in the Marico regard his stories with stern criticism because, in their view, he used surnames and geographical names to give an inaccurate picture of themselves. (37)

In this matter, then, as with so many issues relating to Bosman’s work, the evidence is inconclusive.

In terms of urban readers, who would have composed the most significant demographic from Bosman’s perspective, we do know, however, that Bosman’s pieces in *The South African Opinion* built up something of a cult following:

Bosman fans used to form coffee-clutches to catch the latest fresh issues as they hit the corners, and would even read out aloud to one another Bosman’s latest contributions, be they poems, short stories, reviews, or [...] sketches and essays. (Gray 2002:16)

This kind of passionate engagement certainly suggests a readership that shared Bosman’s implied values and norms and appreciated the stories’ ironies.

Ultimately, the fact that each of the publications in which the Oom Schalk stories initially appeared featured controversial material, intelligent criticism of the arts, and the perpetually satirical (non-fiction) voices of Bignaut and Bosman, leads us to make the fairly safe assumption that Bosman relied on the fact that the readers of these periodicals (with the possible exception of the scandal-sheets) would be reasonably open-minded, sophisticated individuals: the type, in short, who might be safely expected to see past a text’s stated meaning to its covert intention, and enjoy the humour stemming from that gap. The fact that many did *not*, at that time and in later years, is irrelevant to our current

point. It is most plausible that Bosman would have assumed them capable of, and willing to, engage with the text's ironies – further proof, in other words, that the Oom Schalk stories pass Booth's vital first test of irony: that the ironies within are, indisputably, *intended*.

Chapter 4

Narrative Situation: The distance between Schalk and Bosman

In the first chapter, it was pointed out that one of the major refinements Bosman made to the fireside tale was the virtual elision of the fireside audience. The significance of this lies in the fact that previous fireside narratives in the South African tradition tend to rely either on interactions with other interlocutors or on the testimony of a frame narrator to add complexity or irony. Oom Schalk's stories lack both these framing devices. The ironic element in the stories, as a result, must come either from Oom Schalk himself (in 'collaboration' with Bosman, of course), or solely from Herman Charles Bosman, operating authorially 'above' Oom Schalk. It is in determining whether to attribute the irony present in the stories to Oom Schalk or to Bosman that our greatest difficulties lie; and it is one of the main reasons why, as I shall go on to propose, one cannot classify the ironic element of the stories as "stable".

At times it appears that there is little distance between author and narrator: in other words, that Oom Schalk enjoys Bosman's full confidence. The stories' characteristic structure – that is, the unfolding of events which ultimately ironically highlight the absurdity of the prejudices of Schalk's peers expressed at the story's opening – would seem a clear example of collusion between the two. In further support of this view, we have the fact that Oom Schalk is given to observations that are almost impossible to read as entirely guileless. MacKenzie (1999:147) gives the example of Schalk's comment on the subject of the working of the land, in the story "Veld Maiden":

I used to get aches in my back and shoulders from sitting on a stone all day long on the edge of the lands, watching the kaffirs and the oxen and the plough going up and down, making furrows. (*Mafeking Road* 120)

It seems scarcely credible that Schalk intends this as anything other than tongue-in-cheek; and, if in *this* case he is aware of the hypocrisy of his situation, surely it must be the case that he is aware of the hypocrisies of his community elsewhere? In other words, is it not likely that Schalk *is* aware of the ironic implications of his tales?

Critical consensus answers ‘no’ to that question. L.H. Hugo, for instance, suggests that any internal contradictions within the narratives are not the result of any kind of ironic intention on Schalk’s part, but merely the consequence of an irreconcilable clash between two aspects of his character: the fact that Schalk is, in his view, “a dedicated ‘Kafir-hater’ on the one hand and a scrupulously honest story-teller on the other” (162). Oom Schalk’s blinkered bigotry, in other words, precludes him from perceiving the true meaning of the events which his moral code dictates he must truthfully relate. Any irony present, consequently, must be attributable to Bosman rather than Oom Schalk.

This view is lent some credence by the fact that there are numerous examples of comments made by Oom Schalk which appear unambiguously to uphold racist and sexist stereotypes and which are neither obviously tongue-in-cheek *nor* overturned by the subsequent events of the story. Are we to read these as ironic purely on the basis of the ‘message’ of other Oom Schalk stories? The fact is, too, that at no point in the stories themselves is Oom Schalk himself seen explicitly to take issue with, for instance, a character perpetrating racial abuse.

MacKenzie has noted, in this regard, that the original version of “The Music Maker” *did* include a relatively unequivocal indicator that Oom Schalk does not share the belief of the rest of the community that random outbursts of violence against black people are appropriate and unproblematic. MacKenzie (2004:149) explains that in the original draft of the story, Oom Schalk’s description of Manie Kruger’s music recitals includes the following remark: “Nevertheless, there was also a certain amount of unpleasantness about them”. This “unpleasantness”, we later discover, refers to Manie’s habit of “kick[ing] the kaffir” whenever there are problems with the green curtain that the “kaffir” controls. At this point Oom Schalk comments: “That was another part of the unpleasantness that I have already mentioned to you”. Bosman cut both comments from the later version (MacKenzie 2004:149). It is not altogether clear why Bosman would wish to remove one of the very few instances of Oom Schalk’s explicit disapproval of his fellow Boers’ behaviour, but it does seem to support the notion that he intended Oom Schalk to be read as blissfully unaware of the internal contradictions within his narrative.

At certain other points an intellectual and cultural divide between Oom Schalk and Bosman is clearly evident, resulting in jokes being shared between Bosman and the reader behind Oom Schalk's back, as it were. This is evident in the example given previously from "Ox-wagons on Trek", where the source of amusement for the reader is Oom Schalk's inability to recognise the electric chair on film. Another example is found in the use of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* – a work with which Oom Schalk is not likely to be familiar – as a template for his story "The Picture of Gysbert Jonker". In both these examples, the possibility that they evidence sly disingenuousness on Schalk's part is precluded by the fact that the educational, cultural and geographical circumstances of Oom Schalk's life would render it inauthentic for him to be familiar with cultural allusions of this nature. In cases like these, then, there is a strong hint of a framing authorial presence.

One of the greatest irony-related difficulties arises when one attempts to determine the source of the satire directed at Oom Schalk himself. A reading of only a few stories will bring one to an awareness that Oom Schalk is prone to hyperbolic self-praise and has a chronic inability to admit to any kind of weakness or cowardice; but to what degree he takes himself *seriously*, in this regard, is open to question. When we laugh at Oom Schalk, it is occasionally unclear whether we do so at his invitation or not. In certain cases it seems clear that Oom Schalk is speaking in a self-satirical manner, from the vantage point of an older, wiser Oom Schalk slyly poking fun, retrospectively, at his young and foolish self. An example of this is found in the story "Willem Prinsloo's Peach Brandy", where, after describing the patently ridiculous outfit he wears to Willem Prinsloo's party, Oom Schalk observes that:

I believed, as I got on my horse, and set off down the Government road, with my hat rakishly on one side, that I would easily be the best-dressed young man at the dance. (*Mafeking Road* 29)

Here the foregrounding of "I believed", with its emphasis on the past tense, makes it clear that he now judges the situation quite differently.

The story "Yellow Moepels", by contrast, presents us with a rather different brand of mockery directed at Oom Schalk. This story finds Oom Schalk fighting in the war for

the Transvaal against the British. Oom Schalk's sister Annie, concerned for his welfare, visits a witchdoctor to learn whether Oom Schalk will return home safely from battle. The witchdoctor assures her of Oom Schalk's safe return because the throwing of his bones has revealed a vision of Oom Schalk in the midst of the fighting hiding behind a rock with a blanket pulled over his head. Oom Schalk's denial of the veracity of this 'vision' reads as follows:

According to Annie's letter the witchdoctor told her a few other things about me, too. But I won't bother to repeat them now. I think I have said enough to show you what sort of a scoundrel that old kaffir was. He not only took advantage of the credulity of a simple girl, but he also tried to be funny at the expense of a young man who was fighting for his country's freedom. (*Mafeking Road* 75)

Is this a genuine attempt on Oom Schalk's part to save face with his audience? Our instinct may be to write it off as another example of his tongue-in-cheek style, especially as he proceeds to undermine his denial entirely by adding: "What was more, Annie said that she recognised it was me right away, just from the kaffir's description of that blanket" (75). The fact is, however, that the accusation of cowardice in war against the British would presumably be a serious issue in this community, a potentially unforgivable blot on one's character. For proof of this, we need look no further than the story "Mafeking Road", where Oom Schalk tells how Floris van Barneveldt shot his youngest son Stephanus rather than allowing him to surrender to the hated Rooineks. It is entirely possible, then, that Oom Schalk is responding with real indignation here, to save himself the contempt of the assembled audience. *We* still read it as humorous, however, because of the textual evidence pointing to the truth of the witchdoctor's assertion. We may thus read this as an example of another kind of shared joke between Bosman and the reader, at Oom Schalk's expense.

Having seen, then, a number of examples of ways in which narrative collusion in the stories operates between Herman Charles Bosman and the reader, rather than Bosman and Oom Schalk, do we have sufficient proof that the remainder of the irony in the stories is also attributable to a wink from Bosman to the reader, with Oom Schalk as the prejudiced, backward old farmer he appears to be on the surface?

I would argue that this is not the case, for a number of reasons. One of these is that the notion of a clear division between author and narrator is called into question by the fact that Booth's fifth test of stable irony – the knowledge that the author's ideological position is distinctly different from that of the narrator – occasionally fails us. In particular, Sheila Roberts' feminist critique of the Oom Schalk stories has pointed to the fact that Oom Schalk's flat, one-dimensional treatment of the women who feature in his narratives – that is, all uniformly beautiful, and all pictured either betraying men or murdering men or being betrayed or murdered *by* them – is consistent with Bosman's figuring of women in his other fiction and elsewhere in his non-fiction writing (Roberts 157).

Other kinds of internal contradiction are revealed by the Oom Schalk stories *and* Bosman's journalistic writing. For instance, the tussle between gritty realist perspectives on the land and romantic notions of the "soul of the veld" – both of which views Oom Schalk espouses at different times – reveals itself in Bosman's non-fiction too. And in both cases, it is unclear which vision of landscape can be said to be *ironic*.

One answer to the problem of the attribution of irony posed by critics is that the distance between author and narrator is variable from story to story; and, in particular, that the later Oom Schalk stories evince a closeness between the two that is absent from the first stories in the series. Stephen Gray notes that Lily Rabkin, the editor of the journal *The Forum*, pushed Bosman to move away from the Oom Schalk stories towards the 'conversation-piece' format of the Voorkamer stories, which he began writing in 1950, because

Rabkin felt that the third, post-war cluster of abundant Oom Schalk stories, outnumbering those of the first and second phases, was showing certain strains. Oom Schalk was no longer keeping his distance, was too pally with his author, so that Bosman was no longer allowing the stories themselves to contradict what Oom Schalk said about them...Rabkin was right. (2005:342)

Gillian Siebert suggests, in support of this, that in the later Oom Schalk stories

the views [Schalk] expresses are no longer contradicted by the stories he tells: the distance between author and narrator would seem to have diminished

somewhat. Therefore, although he still ostensibly upholds the values and traditions of his community, it is most usually with his tongue in his cheek.
(82)

In order to assess this contention, in the chapters that follow I will examine three of Oom Schalk's most prominent themes - art, race, and land - by means of close analysis of relevant stories. In the case of art and race, an early story on the subject will be compared with a later offering, in order to assess the possibility of a shifting distance in the relationship between Oom Schalk and Bosman. In exploring the handling of land in the Oom Schalk stories, one story is adequate for the purposes of analysis to capture Oom Schalk's inconsistent and shifting perspective.

Chapter 5

Art and the artist figure

5.1 Extrinsic contexts

When examining the Oom Schalk stories for evidence of the distance between Schalk and Bosman, perhaps a good place to start is those stories dealing with an artist figure, or a member of the Marico community with artistic predilections. Our understanding of stories dealing with other themes is perpetually hampered by the fact that we have no accurate means of gauging what Bosman's own steadfast ideological standpoint was on these matters. When it comes to the notion of art, however, it would seem that we need be in little doubt.

Being an 'artist' was central to Bosman's sense of self. His characteristically ironic vision seems to have faltered in this regard, as he was prone to the most absurdly self-aggrandising – and not noticeably ironic, it must be stressed – prescriptive comments with regard to his notions of what constituted an appropriate artistic identity and outlook. In an early piece for the scandal-sheet *The New Sjangbok*, for instance, Bosman writes as follows:

The perversity of the artist is something that the little intellectual men and women try so hard to understand – and when they can't understand it they are hurt. It is so easy to hurt them. What they don't realise is that, if a man is an artist, everything he does is art. And the artist also knows that, after all, this beauty and glory are nothing. Art is for the mob to worship – and they must worship it. The artist cannot worship anything but himself, and he knows that when he has finished writing a poem it no longer lives for him, But it must go on living for the mob.

That is the difference between an artist like myself and earnest plodders like Sarah Gertrude Millin. (Gray 2005:167)

Margaret Lenta has made a convincing argument for the fact that Bosman considered himself to be resolutely 'bohemian' in outlook and lifestyle, styling himself consciously to this end (112), and it was possibly a need to prove himself in this regard that drove him to make these kinds of statements with such frequency. He asserted numerous times his

belief that the calibre of one's art should be assessed on the basis of one's whole lifestyle as 'Artist', instead of being appraised merely as the end result of the creative process. What the artist says, does and thinks, in Bosman's opinion, was as important as what the artist produces. He wrote:

The artist is king. Whatever he does is art. The hand of the master cannot falter. An artist cannot be judged by the quality of his purely artistic products in the way that the craftsman is judged by the dexterity he displays in the manipulation of the tools of his trade. This is an important distinction. ("Study of a Poet Genius", *A Cask of Jerepigo* 53)

Similarly:

You can tell if a man is a poet by the things he writes. But you can tell far better if a man is a poet by the things he lives. ("What is Poetry?" *A Cask of Jerepigo* 61)

What the above statements – and there are many more of their kind – seem to suggest, then, is a vision of art that is decidedly elitist and unashamedly romantic. As a result, one would expect to find a strong identification on Bosman's part with the artist figure in the Oom Schalk stories.

Complicating the matter, however, we have the fact that just when we appear to have built up a clear picture of Bosman's views on the matter, the sly prankster produces a statement that appears to deflate utterly all previous assertions, leaving us on uncertain ground once more. In a piece for *The South African Opinion*, Bosman distinguishes between the "comic stereotype" of the poet in contrast with the currently fashionable affectation of solemnity, and makes it clear that he endorses the former, however 'solemn' we may have taken his own pronouncements on the subject to be:

No matter what sort of genius, or lack of it, even, there may be in a poet's "Ode to the Spring", the poet as a person must not be taken with heavy earnest. The comic conception of a poet, whether he is writing immortal tragedies in front of a flickering taper in an attic, or whether he is performing a springtime hop, skip and jump in a field, is the only kind of conception that rings true to me. [...] But it is all so different today. The poet has become

such a solemn person. So heavy and ponderous, invested with such grave dignity. (“Spring!” *A Cask of Jerepigo* 149)

And note Bosman’s relish in recounting the following anecdote, which clearly provided some measure of inspiration for both “The Music Maker”, where Manie Kruger’s recital is initially not treated with quite the gravity the musician feels the event should, by rights, be accorded; and the scene in “Romaunt of the Smuggler’s Daughter”, where halfway through Jemima’s operatic performance a coup of sorts is staged, which sees the locals drown out her Italian arias with heartily-sung renditions of old favourites like “Vat jou goed en trek, Ferreira”:

A man told me about the time Paderewski came to play in the Wanderers’ Hall. Johannesburg was then a mining camp and flattered that a world famous celebrity had come to honour them with a visit, and so they turned up in force, determined to give Paderewski the most rousing reception he had ever had. They passed a bottle of whisky on to the stage, so that he could have a swig before he started playing. And they enjoyed his music so much that they stamped their feet on the wooden boards in accompaniment to a Chopin prelude, and as Paderewski’s fingers swept over the keyboard they shouted out their encouragement to him, and when they knew a few snatches of a melody, here and there, they sang “Tra-la-la”, like that, with great gusto.

Anyway, Paderewski didn’t give any more concerts in Johannesburg. Apparently he also held sacerdotal ideas about a pianist’s status. (“Spring!” *A Cask of Jerepigo* 149)

Bosman’s amusement, here, at the notion that an artist would hold “sacerdotal ideas” about his or her artistic status is clearly in conflict with some of the statements about art produced above. Characteristically, then, we are unable to ‘pigeonhole’ him into one particular notion of what constitutes artistic identity; and, as shall be seen, it appears that this irreducible ambivalence towards the artist figure is passed on intact to Oom Schalk.

5.2 “The Ramoutsa Road” (1931)

Schalk’s opening statement to “The Ramoutsa Road” prepares us for a death:

You'll see that grave by the side of the road as you go to Ramoutsa, Oom Schalk Lourens said.

It is under that clump of withaaks just before you get to the Protectorate border. The kaffirs are afraid to pass that place at night. (*Seed-time and Harvest* 31)

The pronominal deictics employed here – “*that* grave”, “*that* clump” – establish an easy sense of familiarity with the fireside audience; the fact that they occupy a shared geographical space. Schalk's next statement abruptly shifts focus from the grave, however: “I knew Hendrik Oberholzer well” (31). So sudden is this topic change that the average reader, or listener, may well expect this Hendrik Oberholzer to finish the story as the occupant of the grave. In his characteristic fashion, of course, Schalk will confound this expectation; but the fact remains that the reader knows the story's outcome – that is, death – from the start. To whom this piece of narrative prolepsis will apply is the only uncertain factor.

Schalk proceeds to a brief discussion of Hendrik Oberholzer's character: he is, it emerges, a man of stricter moral scruples than the average member of the Marico community. This is an assumption we – and Schalk – make largely on the basis of the fact that he does not smuggle cattle across the border. The theme of cattle-smuggling operates as a structuring device – a kind of ‘leitmotif’ – for the story as a whole. The subject is initially introduced as the marker of difference between Hendrik and the other Marico farmers. Then, halfway through the story, the theme is returned to by means of a reference to the ineffectiveness of the police: “All they ever did was to get our people fined for bringing scraggy kaffir cattle across the line” (34). Near the end of the tale, Schalk employs another allusion to the illicit activity as a time-marking device: “I am not sure of the date, although I know that it was shortly after the second time that I had to pay ten pounds for cattle smuggling” (35). By means of this running sub-theme, then, the story is seamlessly laced together.

Apart from its structural use, the device also serves a thematic function, both in terms of highlighting the irony of the fact that the misfortune that the story proceeds to detail should fall upon Hendrik, as one of the few morally-upstanding members of the community; and in terms of the fact that moral laxity is ubiquitous, and tacitly accepted – even approved of – yet Paulus's actions are seen as unforgivable. Crime, it seems, is

acceptable on a small scale; sin, on the other hand, is not – and the hypocritical members of the Marico community draw the distinction between the two when and where it suits them.

Hendrik lives on the ironically-named farm “Paradyskloof”: ironic, that is, in terms of the tribulations soon to befall it. It is on this farm that Schalk first encounters Hendrik’s strange son Paulus, who – presumably unlike ‘normal’ Marico boys – despises working on the farm:

Paulus was a lively youngster and full of spirits when there was drought in the land and there was no ploughing to be done. But when it rained, and they had to sow mealies, Paulus would be sulky for days. (31)

Paulus not only dislikes field labour, he also lacks the customary respect for their elders expected of the Marico youth. When Schalk addresses Paulus on the farm one day, merely instructing him to inform his father of a sack of cement Schalk wishes to borrow, Paulus responds with astonishing rudeness:

He didn’t stop the oxen or even turn his head to look at me. “To hell with you and your cement,” he shouted.

Then he added, when he got about fifteen yards away, “And the sheep-dip.” (31)

Schalk has little patience with such moody adolescent behaviour. He defers immediate mention of what punishment he exacts on young Paulus, elliptically commenting only that “for some time after that Hendrik Oberholzer and I were not on speaking terms”. It emerges that Schalk claims to have “only flicked Paulus’s bare leg with the sjambok”; but Hendrik refers to it as a “thrash[ing]” (31), leaving us with the suspicion that the truth possibly lies more in Hendrik’s account. Hendrik and Schalk reconcile at Nagmaal, however, much to Schalk’s relief; as, apart from Hendrik’s upstanding Christian ways, he also “regularly passed on to me the Pretoria newspapers after he had finished reading them himself” (32).

It is typical of Schalk to downplay the nature of his relationship with Hendrik in this manner, gruff and hardened as his ‘performance face’ must always be; but as the subsequent events of the story demonstrate, Schalk appears to have what amounts to (by

Marico standards at least) a close and supportive friendship with the other farmer. Schalk notes with some concern, for instance, the fact that, as time progresses, “Hendrik was much worried on account of his son” (32). Hendrik’s worry stems from his son’s “strange ways” (32), which have a number of different manifestations. For a start, he wishes to be educated further, despite the fact that he has had what in Schalk’s opinion amounts to “more than enough learning for a farmer”: he was allowed to attend school until Standard Four, he has been to Sunday-school classes since he was seven years old, and he has been taught how to lay flat stones for stoeps. Paulus is not satisfied, however; and even his father’s cautionary tale of how Piet Slabberts returned from high school an atheist and, two months later, was run over by an ox-wagon after falling off it, fails to deter him. Paulus’s response to this clearly absurd story would probably be similar to that of the average reader – and, we must assume, Bosman himself:

Paulus only laughed.

“That is not so wonderful,” he said. “If an ox-wagon goes over your head you always die, unless you’ve got a head like a Bushman’s. If Piet Slabberts didn’t die, only then would I say it was wonderful.” (32)

But Schalk’s apparently straight-faced response is as follows: “Yes, it was sinful of Paulus to talk like that when we could all see that in that happening was the hand of God” (32). Bosman is certainly satirising this kind of simplistic cause-and-effect religious reasoning, here, but there is no textual evidence indicating that Schalk does not take it seriously. Perhaps his endorsement of the story is merely to delineate clearly his ideological distance from Paulus, against whom Schalk appears to maintain a grudge until the story’s end. It clearly offends Schalk’s sense of what constitutes correct child behaviour (and even correct *male* behaviour), for instance, that Paulus only helps with the farmwork, even in a period of extreme drought, “when his father and the kaffirs could not do any more” (32). Schalk comments with evident disapproval: “And yet he was twenty and a strong, well-built young man. But there was something in him that was bad” (32).

The reader may, at this stage, be a little confused by Paulus’s seemingly motiveless bad behaviour. The light dawns, however, when the nature of Paulus’s problem is revealed:

He would often take a piece of paper and a pencil with him and go away into the bush and write verses all day. Of course Hendrik tore up those bits of paper whenever he found them in the house. But that made no difference. Paulus just went on with his sinful, worldly things, even after the minister had spoken to him about it and told him that no good come out of writing verses – unless they were hymns. (32/33)

Paulus, then, fancies himself something of a poet, which instantly renders his behaviour more revealing: he is no longer simply a sulky teenager, but an Artist. To refer to the writing of poetry as engaging with “sinful, worldly things” is nonsensical. Leaving the issue of ‘sinfulness’ aside, surely few things could be *less* “worldly” than the writing of poetry. Ordinarily, in a situation such as this, one could safely claim that Oom Schalk is taking a jab at poetry, here, with a knowing wink to the audience. In terms of his evident dislike for – and disapproval of – Paulus, however, it seems plausible to suggest that his eagerness to criticise Paulus is so extreme that it works to counter his rationality: or perhaps, more likely, that he is more than willing to stand with Hendrik Oberholzer and the minister on the side of the fence which he knows, rationally, is absurd, simply for the purposes of taking an expedient shot at Paulus.

Visiting Hendrik’s farm one day, Schalk finds Paulus’s mother Lettie very upset by her discovery of some samples of Paulus’s poetry:

It was the same kind of verses that he had been writing for a long time, all about mimosa trees and clouds and veld flowers and that sort of nonsense. When I read those things I felt sorry that I didn’t hit him harder with the sjambok that day he kicked me on the shin. (33)

Again, one might be tempted to read Oom Schalk’s response here as being affectionately tongue-in-cheek in tone, were it not for the fact that we know that the encounter which saw Schalk whip Paulus with the sjambok was not in any way a humorous or affectionate one. Chances are, then, that Schalk’s threatening mutterings are, here, intended fairly seriously; and his words to Hendrik’s wife certainly appear heartfelt: “‘A man who writes things like that will come to no good,’ I said to her. ‘And I am sorry for you. It is not good the way Paulus is treating you’“ (33).

The other aspect of Paulus' behaviour which is cause for concern is the fact that he shows no interest in the young girls of the district: he "took no notice of girls and seemed shy in their company" (33). This is problematic (to Schalk, Hendrik et al.) because it is suggestive of a wider shunning of the old and accepted ways of the Marico community. His refusal to pay attention to the local girls is portrayed as going hand-in-hand with his fondness for poetry. This is our first exposure to the idea that an attachment to art, and the development of artistic sensibilities, automatically results in the eschewing of Marico conventions and the time-honoured life-plan for a Marico Boer, with consequent alienation for the individual.

Shortly after Schalk's discussion with Lettie, Paulus disappears, without giving anyone any idea of his destination. Hendrik, being "very much troubled" (34), enlists Schalk's help to find his errant son. Schalk travels miles in search of Paulus; he is away for "many days", and his search is not in vain:

For, on my way back along the Bechuanaland border, I had come across Paulus. It was in some Mtosa huts outside Ramoutsa. There were about a dozen huts of red clay standing in a circle amongst the bushes. In front of each hut a kaffir lay stretched out in the sun with a blanket over him. All day long these kaffirs lie there in the sun, smoking dagga and drinking beer. Their wives and children sow the kaffir-corn and the mealies and look after the cattle. And with no clothes on, but just a blanket over him, Paulus also lay amongst those kaffirs. I looked at him only once and turned away, without knowing whether he had seen me.

Next to him a kaffir woman sat stringing white beads on to a piece of copper wire. (35)

Paulus, it appears, has 'gone native': the ultimate sin in a community where their sense of identity is crucially dependent on upholding the notion of their fundamental 'difference' from the black people of the area. Theirs is a sense of self constructed differentially and necessarily involving the repudiation of all behaviours associated with the "kaffirs". Paulus's actions, then, represent an affront to the most fundamental notions of what constitutes decent 'Afrikanerdom' to this community. Schalk notes:

I had known before of low-class Uitlanders going to live in a kraal and marrying kaffir women and spending the rest of their lives sleeping in the sun

and drinking bujali. But that was the first time I had heard of that being done by a decent Boer son. (35)

Oom Schalk's advice to Hendrik – that “The Lord will make all things right” (34) – may seem merely fatalistically resigned; but, in the light of the story told earlier by Hendrik which sees Piet Slabberts receive his just deserts from God in the form of a fatal accident, it takes on a more sinister sense: namely, that the Lord can be relied on to mete out a much-deserved punishment. Hendrik agrees – “Yes, God knows what is best” (34) – and opines, furthermore, that “It would be much better if he were dead” (35). To this, Schalk says only that “Hendrik Oberholzer was right when he said it would be better if Paulus was dead” (35); and, again in the absence of any textual evidence to the contrary, we must interpret this sentiment as sincere.

Nothing further is spoken about Paulus until approximately six months later, when Hendrik and Schalk are approached by a young black man who informs them that “Baas Paulus [is] dead” (35) and hands Hendrik a letter written by Paulus the night before. We are never ‘shown’ what is in the letter – an authentic touch, because our access is mediated through Schalk, and Schalk himself never sees it. Paulus, it emerges, has hanged himself; and when Hendrik and Schalk arrive to collect his body, they find it lain out in a hut, in front of which is the same woman seen by Schalk with Paulus on the earlier occasion, and it is clear that she is pregnant.

Hendrik refuses any kind of symbolic reconciliation with his son, even in death:

“I will not have him back on my farm,” he said. “Let him stay out here with the kaffirs. Then he will be near later on, for his child by the kaffir woman to come to him.” (36)

They bury Paulus, as a result, in the spot mentioned by Schalk in the story's opening line, thus solving the mystery of whose body lies in the grave, and giving the story a neat structural unity. The story does not end here, however, which automatically renders what follows significant, as it would seem textually ‘logical’ to conclude with the detail which ties the story's end to its beginning. Instead, the story closes as follows: “‘I knew the Lord would make it right,’ Hendrik said when we got into the mule-cart” (36).

This structuring, then, means that we are intended to give some importance to this statement; and its significance cannot be overlooked, because it contains the devastating irony which ‘undoes’ the story as a whole. The point is that the Lord has played no part at all in Paulus’ death: Paulus has chosen to take his own life, just as earlier he chooses to *lead* his life in the way that he desires. In this way he is a rebel to the end. What Hendrik’s words reveal most pointedly, however, is the blind, hypocritical dogmatism of the ‘Christian’ Marico community; the twisting of facts to fit a cherished Biblical notion of God’s punishment for non-believers, rather than accept the truth that Paulus’s death has everything to do with *human* actions rather than God’s – and primarily, *Hendrik’s* actions, for denying his son the education he craves; for refusing to acknowledge his sensitive artistic nature; and for disowning him once he “turns native” in desperation at the thought of having to continue leading a life he despises.

In this story we see for the first time the exploration of a theme that was to become a favourite of Bosman’s: the mistrustful attitude of the Marico community towards those who seek to better themselves through education, like Piet Slabberts. Equally significant, however, is the emergence of another frequently-explored theme of Bosman’s: that of the suspicion of the Marico Boers towards art generally, and those individuals who reveal artistic pretensions, in particular.

In “The Ramoutsa Road” it is not entirely clear whether Bosman’s sympathies lie with the misunderstood Paulus Oberholzer. The story’s tragic conclusion points to the possibility that he *does*, as does Paulus’s very ‘reasonable’ rejection, early on, of the ludicrous cautionary tale of Piet Slabberts. Simultaneously, however, the story is a vehicle for Bosman’s ironic take on the stereotype of the ‘tortured artist’: a perpetually-misunderstood individual who retreats into the countryside each day to pour out his or her feelings about the beauty of nature – the “mimosa trees and clouds and veld flowers” – in poor-quality poetry. Paulus exemplifies the tortured solemnity of the “heavy, ponderous” artist which Bosman purports to abhor in the piece entitled “Spring!” quoted above from *The South African Opinion*. For this reason, it may be that while Bosman would not endorse the belief of the community that Paulus’s death represents “God’s punishment”, he might have scorned Paulus both for the moodiness which accompanied his adoption of

an artistic persona, and for the fact that he is, in essence, a ‘quitter’ – ultimately incapable of pursuing his artistic dreams with the necessary resolve.

The textual evidence available to us suggests that Schalk largely endorses the views expressed by Hendrik Oberholzer throughout; and in his delivery of the story’s bitterly ironic final line we sense a tone of self-righteous agreement, and something approaching satisfaction at the ‘neatness’ of the conclusion to the Paulus Oberholzer problem, rather than retrospective regret.

In its performance by Oom Schalk, then, “The Ramoutsa Road” becomes a cautionary tale far outstripping that of Piet Slabberts. The story of Paulus Oberholzer, the boy who shunned farm work in favour of poetry and ended up killing himself, is the perfect narrative for Marico parents to pass on to their children as a chilling warning. Those who are seduced by Art, the message goes, will come to no good. In subsequent stories, as will be seen, Oom Schalk would go on to relay this kind of moral with a ‘wink’ to the reader. In “The Ramoutsa Road”, however, the wink travels exclusively between Bosman and the reader.

5.3 “The Music Maker” (1935)

“Of course, I know about history,” Oom Schalk declares as he prepares to tell the story of “The Music Maker”: “it’s the stuff children learn in school” (*Mafeking Road* 44). That he should speak of “history” as something so academically abstract and far removed from his Marico experience is, of course, richly ironic: Schalk, and the rest of the Marico Boers, seem to spend the majority of their time indulging in reminiscences about the past; and their knowledge of the district’s history is extensive. Clearly, however, that kind of yarn-swapping is something they consider very different from “history”: their use of the term is restricted exclusively to refer to the world-shaping deeds of famous men.

Before embarking on the primary narrative relating to Manie Kruger, Schalk indulges in a tangential anecdote involving a trip taken by Dirk Snyman to Cape Town, where, to Snyman’s horror and the total nonchalance of everyone else in the vicinity, a “kaffir” has the temerity to sit down next to him on a tram. It’s a seemingly unrelated

aside which nonetheless makes the point that the times are changing – outside the Marico, at least, but soon to penetrate even this remote part of the country.

Schalk continues his discussion on “history” with the words: “Yes, it’s a queer thing about wanting to get into history” (44) – an unusual way to express the desire for fame, as if it were an exclusive club one wanted to join. The individual who cherishes this desire most in the Marico, it seems, is a man called Manie Kruger, whom Schalk classifies as “one of the best farmers in the Marico” (44), due to his prowess at the following activities:

He knew just how much peach brandy to pour out for the tax-collector to make sure that he would nod dreamily at everything Manie said. And at a time of drought Manie Kruger could run to the Government for help much quicker than any man I ever knew. (44)

Successful farming in the Marico, then, depends less on one’s natural feeling for the cultivation of the soil, than one’s ability to manipulate the bureaucratic processes of government to one’s benefit.

The turning-point for Manie Kruger, however, comes when he chances upon “an article in the *Kerkbode* about a musician who said that he knew more about music than Napoleon did” (44). The reference to Napoleon in a musical context, here, must surely be interpreted as some kind of malapropism; the fact that Schalk does not have any apparent quibble with the reference makes this an example of the kind of in-joke shared between Bosman and the reader.

Inspired by this article, Manie can “talk of nothing but his place in history and of his musical career” (44); for Manie, we are now informed, is the finest concertina-player in the Marico, famed for his performances at every Bushveld dance. The first worrying change that comes over Manie, subsequent to his decision to seek musical fame, is that he declares he will never again play at a dance, an occasion apparently unworthy of his musical talents. This saddens the Marico locals, but none more than Letta Steyn: exactly why this should be so is not clarified here, but the reference to Manie Kruger as her “lover” at the story’s end reveals that the two are in a relationship.

More disturbing changes in Manie are to come, based on his warped notion of what kinds of behaviour are most in keeping with the ‘tortured musician’ stereotype.

‘Getting into history’, in Manie’s mind, is dependent just as much on his ability to fit the musician mould in terms of brooding attitude and the like, as it is on his actual musical talent. Like young Krisjan Geel in “Splendours from Ramoutsa”, however, he finds himself perpetually hampered by the banal realities of his milieu; how much easier, it seems to him, to be a tortured musician in a damp garret in Paris than on a Marico farm:

Once he said that what he had to do to get into history was to die of consumption in the arms of a princess, like another musician he had read about. Only it was so hard to get consumption in the Marico, because the climate was so healthy. (45)

Manie begins to give “recitals” in his voorkamer, after amending the room suitably: moving in benches and chairs borrowed from the neighbours, and stringing up a green curtain at the end of the room. Manie sits behind this curtain, waiting for the recital to start. Schalk notes, in a tone that makes it clear that he finds the whole enterprise mildly ridiculous, that “I knew it was Manie by his veldskoens, which were sticking out from underneath the curtain” (45). It is the mention of the veldskoens that may strike the reader as most humorous here: metonymically, they capture the incongruity of the notion of a Bushveld farmer attempting to model himself on the great European maestros.

The incongruity is not lost on Schalk, or the other Marico locals. As it would be unseemly for a great musician to draw his own curtain, Joel, “the farm kaffir”, performs this action; but when Manie is revealed, the farmers do not react with the admiration and excited anticipation he may have been hoping for:

A few of the younger men called out “Middag, ou Manie,” and Jan Terreblanche asked if it wasn’t very close and suffocating, sitting behind that piece of green curtain. (45)

The audience members are, in other words, unable to perform the necessary ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ which would constitute Manie’s desired reception. Not sharing Manie’s familiarity with performance conventions for famous musicians, they see only the humour of the fact that one of their peers is sitting behind a piece of material for no apparent reason. This, probably combined with some residual resentment towards him for his incomprehensible refusal to continue playing at their much-cherished dances, results

in an atmosphere of gentle mockery rather than the respectful hush that Manie expects. They are silenced, however, when Manie begins to play:

And we all knew that it was the most wonderful concertina music we had ever listened to. It was Manie Kruger at his best. He had practised a long time for that recital; his fingers flew over the keys; the notes of the concertina swept into our hearts; the music of Manie Kruger lifted us right out of that *voorkamer* into a strange and rich and dazzling world.

It was fine. (46)

Schalk's description makes clear his respect for Manie's musical talent: there is no tone of mockery here. The rest of the farmers respond similarly; despite the absurdity of the fact that between each song the curtain is drawn on Manie for a pause of a few minutes before re-opening, there is no further teasing. Manie, Schalk adds, leaves his seat only once: "That was when there was some problem with the curtain and he got up to kick the kaffir" (46). It is typical of this community that it would be considered less trouble to attack the black man in charge of this task than simply to perform it oneself. It is also noteworthy that Joel, the "kaffir" whose task it is to raise the curtain, although previously introduced by name (unusually, for a farm worker), is here nominally relegated to "the kaffir": his inefficiency loses him the status of a name.

Manie's adherence to 'famous musician protocol' continues after his performance, when, to the farmers' surprise, Manie disappears into the kitchen and "sends word that we could see him round the back" (46). Schalk and the others find this strange, but are reassured by Manie's greatest admirer, Letta Steyn, who informs them that "in other countries, the great musicians and stage performers all received their admirers at the back" (46). The farmers accept this in good humour, with the only snide comment emanating from Jan Terreblanche, who probably voices what all the others are thinking: "if these actors used their kitchens for entertaining their visitors in, he wondered where they did their cooking" (46). The possibility that this could be a genuinely perplexed query is negated by the fact that Schalk prefaces his next statement, to the effect that most of the farmers *do* go round to the kitchen, with the word "nevertheless", indicating that there is some discomfort among the farmers towards the idea. The farmers

who do humour Manie in calling on him ‘backstage’ must then tolerate Manie’s predictions of his future greatness:

Manie spoke much of his musical future, and of the triumphs that would come to him in the great cities of the world, when he would stand before the curtain and bow to the applause. (46)

Schalk, uncharacteristically, has no barbed comment to make in response to this: a sure sign of the fact that he is either genuinely awe-struck by Manie’s musical talent, or has much sympathy for him based on events to come.

Manie’s musical career continues, after this, with a number of further recitals; but, predictably, the tension between the Marico way-of-life and the lifestyle of the Artist begins to make itself felt:

[The recitals] were all equally fine. Only, as he had to practise all day, he couldn’t pay much attention to his farming. The result was that his farm went to pieces and he got into debt. The court messengers came and attached half his cattle while he was busy practising for his fourth recital. And he was practising for his seventh recital when they took away his ox-wagon and mule-cart. (46)

What these events reveal, quite literally, is the impossibility of reconciling the exigencies of daily Marico life with serious artistic aspirations. Attempts to do so inevitably end in disaster, as the suicide of Paulus Oberholzer in “The Ramoutsa Road” most tragically reveals.

It becomes necessary for Manie to leave the Marico, both in terms of furthering his musical career and because the court has attached all of his possessions. Before he departs, however, he is given a fitting send-off:

The predikant and the Volksraad member both made speeches about how proud the Transvaal was of her great son. Then Manie replied. Instead of thanking his audience, however, he started abusing us left and right, calling us a mob of hooligans and soulless Philistines, and saying how much he despised us. (47)

As is the case earlier when Manie announces that he will only receive his admirers round the back, the farmers' response is one of bewilderment. Once again, Letta Steyn steps in to interpret Manie's behaviour: she explains that Manie is merely fulfilling the behavioural requirement of all great artists that demands that they refer to their place of origin in the most pejorative fashion possible. This explanation seems to allay the farmers' confusion and alarm most satisfactorily. Schalk reports:

So we knew it was all right, and the more offensive the things were that Manie said about us, the louder we shouted "Hoor, hoor vir Manie." There was a particularly enthusiastic round of applause when he said that we knew as much about art as a boomslang. (47)

Is Schalk's reporting, here, accurate? As unlikely as it may seem that the audience would respond with such warmth to such insults, the likelihood is either that they are simply relishing the absurdity of the situation, and are willing to play along for laughs; or that they genuinely respect the fact that one of their peers is adopting the role of great musician with such authenticity – Schalk comments that "We could feel that Manie's speech was the real thing" (47). Manie's speech is also compared to "when De Wet said what he thought of Cronje's surrender to the English at Paardeberg" (47): an analogy which must be favourable.

A letter is received from Manie when he reaches Pretoria, but that is the last the Marico community hears from him. The individual who most regrets his departure, of course, is Letta Steyn; and Schalk's poignant description of her awaiting Manie's return reveals a great deal of sympathy for her romantic plight:

Yet always, when Letta Steyn spoke of Manie, it was as a child speaks of a dream, half wistfully, and always, with the voice of a wistful child, she would tell me how one day, one day, he would return. And often, when it was dusk, I would see her sitting on the stoep, gazing out across the veld into the evening, down the dusty road that led between the thorn-trees and beyond the Dwarsberg, waiting for the lover who would come to her no more. (47)

Schalk, however, does see Manie Kruger again – but in very different circumstances to those aspired to by Manie. It is in Pretoria, "quite by accident" (47), that Schalk encounters Manie – "and he was playing the concertina – playing as well as ever,

I thought” (47). But Manie is not playing to a packed concert-hall, as he had once predicted. Schalk’s final line reveals the sad reality of Manie Kruger’s circumstances:

But what affected me very strangely was just that one glimpse I had of the green curtain of the bar in front of which Manie Kruger played. (47)

This is masterfully subtle structuring on Bosman’s part. The last detail of the green curtain immediately returns us to Manie’s first recital, and makes the contrast between his life then – surrounded by an admiring community – and now – playing for a pittance in a bar – all the more poignant. Schalk is vague about the sight’s effect on him; but precisely this vagueness, combined with the fact that he “went away quickly”, suggests his profound sadness at Manie’s fate.

Like Paulus Oberholzer, then, Manie Kruger’s attempt to separate himself from his community via his artistic talent comes to no good; once again, the character who reveals artistic aspirations is textually ‘punished’. Manie’s musical activities are appropriate only as a harmless hobby, and when they serve the practical purpose of accompanying the time-honoured Bushveld dances. Art for art’s sake is dangerously self-indulgent, and paradoxically both too sensuous and too effete for the likes of the doggedly earth-bound, conservatively-religious Marico locals.

Where “The Music Maker” differs from “The Ramoutsa Road” in this regard, however, is in terms of Schalk’s attitude towards the protagonist and the story’s events: it is clear that Schalk hold a high regard for Manie’s musical gifts, a deep sympathy for Letta Steyn’s position, and a real regret at Manie’s failure. As such, his position here clearly tallies far more closely with Bosman’s own than in “The Ramoutsa Road”, where Schalk’s hypocritically hostile attitude towards Paulus Oberholzer is possibly not shared by Bosman.

How, then, to account for the fact that Schalk is so clearly unsupportive of Paulus Oberholzer’s artistic pretensions, and yet so fondly tolerant of Manie Kruger’s? Part of the answer probably has to do with age: Paulus is depicted ‘turning rotten’ at a very young age, whereas Manie’s artistic mania comes much later in life. What Paulus’s tale represents, then, is also the younger generation turning against the old, and rejecting everything that Schalk’s generation holds dear, in terms of behaviours and norms. It is the

fact that Paulus's poetry is the manifestation of this that leads to Schalk's antipathy, rather than merely the creative product itself.

Another potential answer can be found in the fact that Manie's change in behaviour is attributable not simply to a love for art, but to a very conscious quest for fame. As such it is far more comprehensible to the Marico farmers; this is not art for art's sake, but a practical means to an end. The fact that he sets out to achieve his place in the history-books with such thoroughness (as seen in the fact that he is meticulously faithful to the demands of behavioural protocol for famous musicians) is met with admiration rather than real disapproval

Another answer, however, lies in the fact possibility that, as critics have suggested, "The Music Maker" functions as an allegory for Bosman's own career; particularly in terms of the fact that the international recognition that he craved eluded him throughout his lifetime. Certainly the publication date of the story is significant: one year earlier, in 1934, Bosman and his wife Eilla Manson had left South Africa for London, where they lived until 1940 – years which Gray describes as "largely 'lost'" (1986:9). In the tale of Manie Kruger, a man from the country "failing to make his mark in the city" (Gray 1986:9), it is not hard to see an echo of Bosman's experience in London. If this is the case, it goes some way towards explaining Schalk's affectionate treatment of Manie Kruger.

5.4 Conclusion

Often, it appears, the Marico community disapproves of art and the artist figure not because of any intrinsic antipathy towards art per se, but because of the distance it automatically places between the artistic individual and the resolutely practical Marico community. They fear the ways of the artist because they are so totally alien to anything to which they can relate, and as such, represent one more way in which the old Marico norms and values are being eroded. They are a group increasingly aware of the encroachment of modernity, and assume that it is only through sticking together that they can survive. An individual who falls prey to artistic pretensions is one less to fight the good fight against the introduction of modern technology and big-city mores.

Schalk, it is fair to say, shares these concerns, as is indicated by his lack of ironic awareness in respect of the story of Paulus Oberholzer. In this story, the major ironies are attributable to Bosman and *not* to Schalk: at this stage, then, a distance is visible between the two.

In the case of “The Music Maker”, however, it appears that both Schalk and Bosman share a profound sympathy for Manie Kruger’s failure; and the affectionately-teasing manner in which Manie’s insistence on the maintenance of artistic protocol is recounted suggests that here, too, the two perform synchronously. This later story reveals a noticeable reduction in the gap between Schalk and Bosman in the narrative situation.

Chapter 6

The Issue of Land

6.1 Extrinsic contexts

There are poems, I am sure, about the heart that aches for Verlore Vlakte, about the melancholy of the sunset over the koppies, the sheep beginning to huddle against the first evening chill, the faraway boom of the windmill, the first chirrup of the first cricket, the last twitterings of the birds in the thorn-trees, the stones of the farmhouse wall still holding the sun's warmth, the kitchen lamp glowing steadily. They are poems I could write myself. It takes generations of life in the cities to drive that nostalgia for country ways from the heart. I will never live it down, nor do I want to. I am corrupted to the bone with the beauty of this forsaken world...I have chosen at every moment my own destiny, which is to die here in the petrified garden, behind locked gates, near my father's bones, in a space echoing with hymns I could have written but did not because (I thought) it was too easy. (Coetzee 138)

The closing lines of J.M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* lyrically capture the dilemma of the South African writer who seeks to convey something of the essence of the country's natural landscape: the issue of needing to avoid waxing too lyrical about the beauty of the land at the expense of taking cognisance of the brutal history of illegitimate appropriation that accompanies it. Bosman's writings on the subject of the land are as fraught with internal contradictions and tensions as one might expect; although, as I shall go on to suggest, the ambiguities inherent in Bosman's tackling of the theme are attributable more to Oom Schalk's resolutely practical nature than to much political design on Bosman's part. As shall be seen, however, both Oom Schalk and Bosman (in his journalistic writing) fluctuate between unsentimental, ironically dismissive views of the land and sudden bursts of seemingly sincere tributes to its beauty, in a manner that, again, must be classified as *unstable*.

Bosman's treatment of the land in the Oom Schalk series, like the handling of so many of his themes, oscillates between the poles of realism and romanticism. To speak of "realism" in reference to any artistic vision of the land is, however, misleading: Jean Marquard reminds us of Amiel's famous dictum that "landscape is a state of mind" (25).

Any depiction of the land, in other words, however ‘truthful’ it purports to be, is premised on a social or cultural, rather than a natural, construct. When we speak of “realism” in reference to portrayals of landscape in South African literary history, then, we refer to a mode of seeing which gives precedence to a view of the land as harsh, gritty, difficult to tame or cultivate; with humans at the mercy of nature’s whim. This is the Africa of Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm*, for instance.

One of the motivations for this depiction of the land by Schreiner and others has to do with the need within South African writers to break away from the English descriptive tradition. Marquard points out that although writers like William Plomer faithfully record the details of the African landscape, so entrenched is it in its ‘Englishness’ nonetheless that “the responses they stir in us fuse with our memories of English seasons and English trees” (30). Ultimately, she suggests, “Africa is incidental to Plomer’s art” (30). In contrast, Bosman’s self-stated commitment to a truly indigenous South African literature¹⁰ means that, of necessity, the uniquely African essence of the landscape must be stressed at every opportunity: which is why, for instance, he unapologetically uses terms like *krantz*, *withaak* and the like without translation.¹¹ We may speculate, then, that it is this attempt to render the veld as ‘foreign’ as possible, in contrast to the tameness of English country meadows and the like, that accounts partially for the air of perpetual perplexity with which Oom Schalk confronts the African landscape.

The ‘realist’ mode of writing about the land has links to what J.M. Coetzee has identified as one of two “dream topographies” that recur in white writing about the land. Coetzee explains that this dream topography projects

¹⁰ See, for instance, his piece for *The South African Opinion* entitled “An Indigenous South African Culture is Unfolding” (*A Cask of Jerepigo* 46).

¹¹ His motivation for this may, of course, have also been an aesthetic one. Describing the way in which early South African novels would gloss Afrikaans words and phrases, for instance, William Plomer commented: “What an impoverishment of literature! If you are going to describe for an English reader what it is like for a man to sit on a koppie and eat biltong it is not enough to say that he was on a small hill with some strips of dried meat” (In Gray 1986:42).

South Africa as a vast, empty, silent space, older than man, older than the dinosaurs whose bones lie bedded in its rocks, and destined to be vast, empty and unchanged long after man has passed from its face. (*White Writing* 6)

In some of Bosman's short stories, the veld is ascribed a sinister and inhospitable essence, closely tallying with Coetzee's topography. The idea of this 'dark side' to the African landscape is most powerfully articulated in the thoughts of one of the protagonists in "Brown Mamba", the only story in the original *Mafeking Road* collection not narrated by Schalk:

The Marico was an unhealthy place to be in, he reflected. The sun and the stones and the thorn-trees. It was maddening. Nothing but thorn-trees and stones and the sun. It was a good country to come to once in a while. But you hadn't to stay long. And you must have company. (*Mafeking Road* 85/86)

This kind of sentiment has close parallels with many such descriptions in Bosman's novel *Willemsdorp* (1951), classified by Stephen Gray as a "tongue-in-cheek epic pioneer in style, hardboiled in outlook" (10). Here, that mysterious ancient quality of the African veld serves as a projection of the characters' deepest anxieties and insecurities when they find themselves alone in it:

And suddenly Charlie Hendricks grew frightened. In the air he breathed there seemed to be the smell of blood. But what frightened him was not the veld's blood smell. It seemed like a very ancient fear, something he could not define. The leaves of the prickly pear seemed ancestral. The fragments of weathered cowdung were timeless. The anthill had always been there, and always it had been that same shade of grey. The weathered cowdung was more primeval than the Triassic rock that had been exposed by the cutting. Above the anthill there was a vast antiquity that went beyond all geological reckonings. The prickly pear seemed alive in an awful, whilom sense, in that aeons ago it should have been extinct. (92/93)

Bosman proceeds to attempt to explain, here, what exactly it is about the veld that induces this kind of fear. The answer, he suggests, lies not in the veld so much as in oneself:

Any Boer with a look of distance in his eyes and a lot of wrinkles on his face will tell you that it is the most natural thing in the world to get frightened – and very frightened, for that matter.

The name the wise old Boer applies to it is ‘Ouma bangheid’ – fear of your grandmother – implying thereby that it is a terror not rooted in modernity, but that it is something going back pretty far. But if that same old Boer has taken to you, he will also try and put you right, winking as he delivers himself of this statement. Why you get frightened, he will tell you, is because in that narrow opening in the bush, cut off from all human companionship, you actually meet yourself. You encounter yourself face to face, the wise old Boer will say, and before God, is not that the most frightening and spinechilling meeting that any man can have? (93)

Here, of course, the fact that the “wise old Boer” is seen to be “winking as he delivers himself of this statement” undermines its gravity in a typically Bosman-esque fashion.

The “romantic” view of the land, in South African literary history, has taken several different forms. Most commonly, it may be one steeped in a nostalgic yearning for a more innocent time, when man lived close to the soil, in harmony with nature. This version of the South African pastoral, as J.M. Coetzee has suggested, frequently focusses on the beauty of the land as a means of avoiding dealing with the problematic issue of the illegitimate appropriation of that land. It is a perspective – given prominence in the Afrikaans *plaasroman* – which subsequent writers have often deliberately shunned, as alluded to by Coetzee’s narrator in the lines from *In the Heart of the Country* quoted above.

This “romantic” mode can be loosely attached to what J.M. Coetzee suggests represents the other ‘dream topography’ that has dominated white writing about the land in South Africa. It looks as follows:

A network of boundaries crisscrossing the surface of the land, marking off thousands of farms, each a separate kingdom ruled over by a benign patriarch with, beneath him, a pyramid of contented and industrious children, grandchildren, and serfs. (*White Writing* 6)

In order to bolster claims to legitimate occupancy of the land, this portrait must be convincingly presented; but in Bosman’s hands it becomes subverted utterly. On Marico farms, the “benign patriarch” becomes an idle, irresponsible and morally dubious loafer;

the “contented and industrious children” are forever seen to be falling in love with undesirable people, causing family rifts, or escaping to the city; while the “contented and industrious serfs” are subjected to random outbursts of spontaneous violence from their white employers when they are not engaged in small-scale theft or smoking dagga by the roadside.

The other South African literary technique traditionally employed to justify the white occupation of the land, Coetzee notes, involves the complete elision of any black presence in the text. “If the work of hands on a particular patch of earth, digging, ploughing, planting, building, is what inscribes it as the property of its occupiers by right,” Coetzee writes, “then the hands of black serfs doing the work had better not be seen” (*White Writing* 5). In contrast, and again with obviously subversive intent, Bosman deliberately foregrounds the work of the farm ‘kaffirs’ in contrast to the idleness of their lazy ‘baas’. Consider again Oom Schalk’s complaint from “Veld Maiden”:

I used to get aches in my back and shoulders from sitting on a stone all day long on the edge of the lands, watching the kaffirs and the oxen and the plough going up and down, making furrows. (*Mafeking Road* 120)

This reflects with some accuracy the socio-economic reality of the nature of South African employment at the time, of course. Sarah Gertrude Millin reports in *The South Africans* (1934) that “In South Africa a white man does not lift or dig or fetch or carry...A white man cannot be seen working beside a black man” (190).

Just who the joke is on, however, is complicated by the fact that, in highlighting the laziness of the Boers, Bosman is possibly drawing on another literary-historical thread for subversive effect. From the earliest chronicles of the Cape, English writers have made disparaging mention of the indolence of the Boers, characterising them contemptuously as “African peasants”: “unwilling to work, and unable to think; with a mind disengaged from every sort of care and reflexion, indulging to excess in the gratification of every sensual appetite”.¹² In giving this character trait such humorous

¹² Sir John Barrow (1764-1848), as quoted by Van Wyk Smith in *Grounds of Contest* (4).

prominence, particularly in Schalk himself (who is, ultimately, a likeable figure), the effect is somehow to rob it of its insulting power.

In the manner in which the Oom Schalk stories shift between the romantic and realistic perspectives adumbrated above, they encapsulate the two dominant paradigms that have characterised representations of the land in South African literary discourse. Where the situation is rendered additionally complex in this case, however, is in the difficulty the reader faces in determining which, if either, represents Schalk's – or Bosman's – *true* vision of his country's natural landscape. This uncertainty is a result of the irony in which both perspectives frequently appear to be embedded.

Bosman's own – unmediated – feelings towards his country's natural landscape were, it seems, almost as conflicted and inconsistent as those expressed by his narrator. That he had a genuine love for its beauty – and particularly for the beauty of the Marico environment – is unquestionable. His description of the Marico nights, in the piece below, could easily be the words of Schalk in one of his rare lyrical flights:

For sometimes, at night, when the world is very still, a soft wind comes sweeping across the veld. Then, if you are outside and listen very carefully, you can hear the story it has to tell. It is thoughtful, this little wind, and the tale it tells, as old as the world and as timeworn, has about it something that is yet new and sweet and strangely stirring. And this story is one that we all love to hear for, steeped as it is in the fragrance of some romance of long ago, it awakens memories of far off things – of trees that are dark in the moonlight, of crumbling garden walls, of stardust and of roses. (“A Teacher in the Bushveld”, *My Life and Opinions* 51)

Equally evident, however, is the fact that Bosman often felt the need to suppress or deny his romantic attachment to the land in a manner not dissimilar to the techniques employed by Oom Schalk. In 1944, for instance, in a piece for *The South African Opinion* entitled “Spring!”, the delight at the arrival of the season evident in that exuberant exclamation mark is unmistakable:

The arrival of each spring makes itself known in a different way, and yet a different manner, to each of us.

You are suddenly conscious of a deep inner thrill; your pulse seems to quicken for no reason; the air is filled with a slow beauty, and when you breathe it is with a sense of delight that recalls bygone, dolorous things; and

the thoughts that surge into your head are wild...oh, wild. (*A Cask of Jerepigo* 148)

How, then, to account for this piece, on the same subject, not three years later?

I, neurotic city dweller, whom the springtimes of the last four or five years have passed by with a studied nonchalance – bringing me neither enchantment nor rapture nor heartache – gaze upon the annual miracle of bursting blooms without the awakening of memories and without wonderment. (“Paysage du Highveld”, *A Cask of Jerepigo* 169)

Here the stated, or purported meaning – that he is indifferent to the changing of the seasons – is in such evident conflict with all other textual clues – “*studied* nonchalance”; the “annual miracle of bursting blooms” – that our conclusion must be that the irony we perceive is intended. In much the same way that Oom Schalk undercuts his romantic bursts of lyricism with blasts of cynicism, then, Bosman is seen to flirt with both perspectives in a similarly uneasy fashion in his journalistic writings. Perhaps this can best be attributed to a reluctance to engage in too much of a passionate communion with his country’s land for much the same reasons articulated by Coetzee’s narrator in *In the Heart of the Country*: because it obliges one, in some ways, to take ownership of the Boer myth of a hereditary tie to the land divorced from the historical reality of its unlawful appropriation.

6.2 “Veld Maiden” (1934)

The conflict between a romantic and a realistic view of the land is perhaps best exemplified by the story “Veld Maiden”. Oom Schalk’s opening statement is an apparent response to a member of the assembled fireside audience: “I know what it is [...] when you talk that way about the veld” (*Mafeking Road* 120). In keeping with the typically economical framing of the story, the precise nature of what it is that the previous speaker has had to say about the veld is not shared with us; but Schalk suggests that this speaker’s views, although not shared by Schalk himself, are not unique:

I have known people who sit like you do and dream about the veld, and talk strange things, and start believing in what they call the soul of the veld, until in the end the veld means a different thing to them from what it does to me. (120)

Schalk's own view of the veld, he asserts, is a far more practical and prosaic one:

I only know that the veld can be used for growing mealies on, and it isn't very good for that, either. Also, it means very hard work for me, growing mealies. (120)

From the story's outset, then, we are presented with two very different responses to the land. The first, in which the vague terms in which it is couched – “talk[ing] strange things” – enact its meaning, suggests a view of the African landscape as mysterious, age-old, inexplicable and, despite the talk of “the soul of the veld”, ultimately impenetrable. It is a vision of Africa that is closely linked to J.M. Coetzee's first “dream topography” outlined above, though not identical to it. Common to both is the crucial element of mystery, and the impossibility of ever coming to an understanding of its essence; Coetzee's topography, however, imbues the landscape with a greater degree of brooding menace, while that of Schalk's interlocutor is a locus of romantic flights of fancy, as the subsequent events of “Veld Maiden” show.

Schalk's own apparently resolutely pragmatic stance, as evinced in the opening to “Veld Maiden”, is a perspective on the land which grants it neither menace nor any other kind of symbolism. By having Oom Schalk deny any kind of deep spiritual attachment to the land, of course, Bosman is ironically undermining one of the sustaining myths of Boer identity, referred to above: that of the Boer as being close to the soil, with the kind of innate love and understanding of it that “Rooineks”, for instance, can only develop in a contrived and artificial manner. The mockery that greets the Englishman's announcement, in “The Rooinek”, that “he had bought a few books on farming, and was going to learn all he could out of them” (*Mafeking Road* 129), for example, attests to this.

However much Schalk may claim that his feelings towards the land are based purely on assessments of its ‘usefulness’, and despite the seeming contempt with which

he dismisses these fanciful notions of “the soul of the veld”, his view is not as unambiguous as the first paragraphs of “Veld Maiden” may suggest. The statement which concludes his opening preamble, launching the central anecdote of the story, is as follows:

But there the veld is. And it is not good to think too much about it. For then it can lead you in strange ways. And sometimes – sometimes when the veld has led you very far – there comes into your eyes a look that God did not put there. (120)

Schalk, it seems, is not as immune to the mysterious power of the land as he initially asserts; and his use of the generalised “you” suggests that he does not believe that anyone else is, either. Of particular interest here is the notion of the veld leading one to develop “a look that God did not put there”; as if over-exposure may lead one to be seduced by some primitive, pagan essence.

Oom Schalk proceeds to relate the story of John de Swardt, a young artist from Johannesburg who has come to the Marico to capture precisely that element of ‘strangeness’ in the landscape that Schalk initially dismisses. When Schalk first encounters him, he is bemused to note the view of his farm that de Swardt has chosen to capture: “He seemed to have picked out all the useless bits for his pictures – a krantz and a few stones and some clumps of khaki-bos” (120). Schalk attempts to persuade him to focus instead on the aspects of his farm of which he is most proud: the vlei, the dam, and “the new cattle-dip that I have just built up with reinforced concrete” (121); but the young painter explains the reason for his choice of landscape as follows:

I want to paint only the veld. I hate the idea of painting boreholes and cattle-dips and houses and concrete – especially concrete. I want only the veld. Its loneliness. Its mystery. (121)

De Swardt proceeds to show Oom Schalk his other paintings, which Schalk discovers are “all the same sort of pictures, barren and stony”; and Schalk, characteristically appraising them in terms of their potential practical use, thinks derisively that

It would be a good idea if the Government put up a lot of pictures like that on the Kalahari border for the locusts to see. Because that would keep the locusts out of the Marico. (121)

Oom Schalk's reaction to these pictures is one of baffled amusement at the painter's youthful foolishness. On viewing de Swardt's final piece of art, however, he is startled into a sharper response: "when I saw that I got a different opinion about this thing that he said was art" (121). In typically elliptical Schalk fashion, he denies the reader a description of it; so that it is only when he advises de Swardt that "you mustn't let anybody here see this Veld Maiden unless you paint a few more clothes on her" (121) that we may infer that the subject is a naked (or minimally-attired) woman. Schalk leaves, concluding that "it seemed a pity that a nice young fellow like that should be so mad" (122); but at their next encounter de Swardt insists, despite the presence of Frans Welman's young wife Sannie, on elaborating on the meaning of the painting:

'It's a dream I have had for a long time, now,' he said at the end, 'and always she comes to me, and when I put out my arms to clasp her to me she vanishes, and I am left with only her memory in my heart. But when she comes the whole world is clothed in a terrible beauty. [...] She's a spirit. She's the spirit of the veld,' De Swardt murmured, 'she whispers strange and enchanting things. Her coming is like the whisper of the wind. She's not of the earth at all.' (123)

That de Swardt should personify the "spirit of the veld" as a female is in keeping with a long-standing tradition in South African literary history. From the earliest of travel writing onwards, it has been standard literary practice to describe the land in feminine terms; and, similarly, for depictions of women to become projections of the land, with both viewed as fertile territory for conquest and exploitation (Van Wyk Smith 52). Women and the land, or aspects of nature, are figuratively linked throughout the Schalk series. The wind is compared to "a girl sobbing out her story of betrayal to the stars" (*Mafeking Road* 23) in "Starlight On The Veld", for instance; Martha Rossouw, in "Yellow Moepels", is described as "more pretty than the veld-trees that bore those yellow moepels [...] – and more wild" (*Mafeking Road* 74).

Why Bosman chooses so frequently to collocate women with the land seems generally to have less to do with issues of illegitimate appropriation, and more to do with

that particular quality of mysteriousness with which he appears to associate both. There is also a kind of romantic sentimentality operating, as the women that feature in the Schalk series are, without exception, described as being beautiful. One might be tempted to read a degree of irony into this, too, except that this figuring of the women is consistent with their depiction in Bosman's longer (non-Schalk narrated) fiction too, as Sheila Roberts (1986) has demonstrated. One must note here, however, the influence of Edgar Allan Poe: Bosman was an enormous admirer of the American's Gothic-styled tales of the supernatural, and it is likely that his portrayal of women in the manner I have described owes much to Poe.

Aside from mystery and a type of unattainable beauty, the other quality that women and the land appear to share is a singular kind of wildness and fickleness. As we have previously noted, a remarkable number of the female protagonists in the Schalk series are seen betraying their husbands, either by running off with other men or even killing them, often seemingly without any particular motive. Nature can, similarly, be unpredictably cruel, as the tragic events of "The Rooinek" exemplify.

What the denouement of "Veld Maiden" evinces most clearly, however, is the strange, often destructive power that both women and the African veld can assert over a man. Schalk's final 'throwaway line' – "As for Frans Welman, it was quite a long time before he gave up searching the Marico for his young wife, Sannie" (124) – reveals that John de Swardt's vision of the "spirit of the veld" has become flesh, quite literally, in the figure of Sannie Welman, and the two have absconded together to Johannesburg.

Schalk's initial scorning of the idea that some strange essence of the veld can induce one to behave uncharacteristically is thus partially repudiated by the story's ending; but the conclusion also provides some substantiation of Schalk's notion that the veld may mean different things to different people. Young John de Swardt has come to the Marico with a single-minded aim: to identify, and then capture in paint, the "loneliness" and "mystery" of the barren landscape. In this he has succeeded; and it is a simple matter for him to turn this romantic gaze on to Sannie Welman. Sannie becomes inextricably collocated with her geographical setting in de Swardt's mind, and the alluring "loneliness" and "mystery" he attributes to the land are easily extended to the woman who begins to personify the veld in his mind. Thus seduced by both, and in thrall

in particular to the enchantment of the veld that Schalk attempts to dismiss in his opening lines, de Swardt has no choice but to elope with Sannie Welman.

6.3 Conclusion

The instability of the ironies in this piece results from the manner in which Oom Schalk oscillates between a number of different perspectives on the issue of the land. His initial good-natured mockery of the preamble's romantic notions becomes serious disapproval – note his genuinely aggrieved response to one of de Swardt's "spirit of the veld" tales, namely: "I don't like this spook nonsense" (124) – which shifts to an acknowledgement of the veld's mysterious power. Towards the story's end, an encounter with de Swardt proceeds as follows:

I then gave him some good advice. I told him to beware of the moon, which was almost full at the time. Because the moon can do strange things to you in the Bushveld, especially if you live in a tent and the full moon is overhead and there are weird shadows amongst the maroelas. (124)

Schalk's final tone appears one of sneaking sympathy: the fact that de Swardt continues to turn to Schalk for advice points to this, as does the fact that Schalk, in essence, provides the necessary instructions to allow the artist to elope safely with Frans Welman's wife: "If you walk down the road you will be able to catch the Government lorry to Zeerust" (124).

Ultimately, it appears that Schalk *does* believe in some strange quality to the veld. His initial denials must, then, be attributed either to a need to 'save face' around the other, supposedly equally pragmatic farmers; or to some self-preservatory instinct: the need to claim himself immune to the veld's seductive power in order to guard against it. In other stories in the series, however, the landscape's mysterious essence is freely admitted and commented upon: in "Unto Dust", for instance, Schalk employs the simile "as strange as the African veld" (*Unto Dust* 52), and, as seen in our survey of other extrinsic contexts, Bosman's own approach to the figuring of landscape is far from

consistent. In their ambivalent responses to the land, then, both Bosman and his narrator are the heirs of conflicted and contested landscape portrayals in South African literature.

Chapter 7

The Issue of Race

7.1 Extrinsic contexts

Bosman's personal stance on racial issues was reasonably liberal for his time, notwithstanding the kind of racial slurs passing as 'pranks' which found their way on to the pages of the scandal-sheets during the 1930s. There is one other instance of questionable behaviour worth mentioning: in 1932, Bosman shamefully occupied himself with electioneering for General Hertzog's "racially purifying" Nationalist Party. Gray (2005) attributes this either to the fact that the man standing for office, whose campaign Bosman ran, was a friend to whom Bosman was merely returning a favour; or to the possibility that it formed some part of yet another strange practical joke. Surely, Gray suggests, Bosman's personal politics at this time must have been anathema to the Nationalist Party hardliners; he was, Gray says, "openly flaunting his African liberation colours" (2005:191); and he quotes the following lines from Bosman's poem "Africa" as some substantiation:

Of Makana, my brother, I sing,
Of Makana, my brother, he,
A trampled, captive Kaffir – yet a king –
My eyes are darker since my brother died... (Gray 2005:190)

Generally, evidence points to the fact that Bosman held fairly progressive, if rather romanticised, views on the race issue for his time. Describing his visit to a 'native Shanty Town', for example, Bosman writes as follows:

Whatever ill-effects detribalisation may have had on the natives, it has done nothing, judging from what is happening in Shanty Town, to the stateliness of their aristocracy. Living under what are nothing less than ghastly conditions, deprived, apparently, of even the barest necessities of human existence, the inhabitants of Shanty Town are displaying, in the face of adversity, a sublime courage that goes far beyond questions of economics and sociology. If life is

spirit, what the natives of Shanty Town bear about them is not poverty but destiny. (“A Visit to Shanty Town”, *A Cask of Jerepigo* 57)

It is hard to imagine Oom Schalk Lourens producing a similar response.

Elsewhere he is found espousing reasonably progressive notions of ‘Africanism’:

Our patriotism would be greatly strengthened if it were to undergo a genuinely African orientation; if we grew to accept the fact that Africa is different, and that we are part of her wonders.

Cleopatra was an African. The strategist of Cannae, who employed the flank attack and the pincers movement, and broke a Roman army, was an African. As South Africans, such thoughts should move us. And if we accept Piet Retief as a national hero, a true sense of South African patriotism would not allow us to exclude Dingane. (“Rock Paintings of the Bushmen”, *My Life and Opinions* 102)

Bosman urged white writers not to attempt to convey the experience of a black person in South Africa, suggesting that “we have stolen enough from the kaffir”. In the same piece, he reveals his opinions on the thorny issue of racial terminology:

If I were a Native, and I had acquired a certain amount of culture, I wouldn’t want to call myself a Bantu or a Native or a negro or an African. No, I would demand to be recognised and accepted as a plain kaffir. I would receive from the hand of the white man nothing less. I would never allow them to take away from me a name so rich in legend, sorrow and so heavy with the drama of Africa. (“Aspects of South African Literature”, *My Life and Opinions* 170)

It is possibly for the reason cited above – that he felt that the attempt to capture black experience was invalid and presumptuous from a white author – that the black characters in the Oom Schalk series are, by and large, so insubstantial (this is something Bosman has been taken to task for on many occasions). Lawson makes the important point, in addition, that Bosman’s attention, in the stories, is “focused not on black experience of whites so much as on white experience of blacks” (Lawson 145). This could not authentically be otherwise, given that our exposure to the Marico environment is mediated through a seemingly ‘typical’ member of the community – Oom Schalk Lourens.

Perhaps the most damning criticism of Bosman's handling of race has come from Lewis Nkosi, who wrote as follows:

My own conviction is that the blacks did not fully engage Bosman's interest; he had a folklorist attitude toward Africans which combined bad anthropology and vulgar sentimentality: a sort of 'save-the-Bushman-art' campaign without any deeper psychological engagement with the people who created that art. There are anthropological clichés like 'telephone drumming' in a part of Africa where it does not in fact exist; or in "Graven Image" Radipolong is forbidden by tradition to carve other Africans because this would be witchcraft; only Africans in the South don't use this form of witchcraft. These things may not matter to white readers but they do for Africans; they are significant distortions. (as cited in Trump 169)

Nkosi's response, it must be noted, has itself been questioned on the grounds that it appears to interpret the Oom Schalk stories as a realist text. That aside, however, Nkosi undoubtedly has a point; the "sentimentality" he speaks of is evident in Bosman's journalistic work as well as the Oom Schalk stories. He wrote as follows, for instance, on the subject of "Bushmen" rock paintings:

Because they were Bushmen they had a serious understanding of the purpose of man and of his high destiny, and when they passed by, what they left behind them, on krantzes and in caves, was beauty. When we grow discouraged at the tawdry manifestations we discover in regard to the low state of development of the human mind today, it is well to reflect on the exalted achievements of a people who saw life truly and who knew better than to regard a stone merely in the light of a potential source of mineral wealth. ("Rock Paintings of the Bushmen", *My Life and Opinions*)

Ultimately, however, we cannot overlook the fact that in almost every Oom Schalk story that features some kind of clash between whites and blacks, it is the black characters that are seen to triumph in the story's ironic conclusion: from the witch-doctor Mosiko's victory over Prophet Stephanus Erasmus, in "The Prophet"; to the 'bush telegraph' which proves more efficient than the white man's new telegraph system ("Bush Telegraph"), to the power of the "native" carvings at which the farmers initially scoff ("Graven Image"). The fact that Bosman wished it so speaks volumes: it is unlikely that a racist author would produce such narratives.

This being so, then, any racism expressed in the stories must be traced back either to Oom Schalk, or to Oom Schalk reporting – without necessarily endorsing – the dominant ideologies of the white Marico community. Bosman, we must conclude, maintains an ironic distance. Of interest to us now is: does Oom Schalk share the prejudices of his community?

7.2 “Makapan’s Caves” (1930)

Perhaps the most suitable early story for scrutiny in this regard is “Makapan’s Caves”, which offers two main points of interest. The first is the fact that although it was the first published Oom Schalk story (initially appearing in *Touleier* in December 1930), it is a far more ‘polished’ product than many subsequent stories.¹³ How is one to account for the fact, for instance, that he was to follow this first story with an offering like “Veld Fire”, some months later, featuring an unnamed, virtually identity-less first-person narrator; while in “Makapan’s Caves”, despite the fact that it is Schalk’s first appearance, the “best storyteller in the Bushveld” appears an already fully-rounded character with an unmistakable and distinctive narrative voice? We can only ascribe it to Bosman’s notoriously uneven literary output; but it is a fact, nonetheless, that makes it difficult to speak of any kind of consistent ‘progression’ in his oeuvre.

The second point of interest about “Makapan’s Caves” is the fact that it is the subject of so much critical debate, for the very reasons we are considering: whether we should read the story’s ironic element as emanating from Schalk’s sly voice or Bosman’s sly pen. The story appears to be more frequently discussed in criticism than any other in the Schalk series, probably due to the seeming outrageousness of its prefatory statement; but, as will be seen, critics by no means concur on the issue of whether Schalk is aware of the absurdity of the ideas expressed in the story’s opening.

Let us start, then, with a consideration of the passage in question:

¹³ MacKenzie does note, however, that certain ‘streamlining’ devices were introduced to later stories which the original version of “Makapan’s Caves” lacked. In that story, for instance, Bosman initially employed inverted commas throughout to denote Oom Schalk’s speech, and Afrikaans words were rendered in italics; later stories would drop both these features (2004).

Kaffirs? (said Oom Schalk Lourens). Yes, I know them. And they're all the same. I fear the Almighty, and I respect His works, but I could never understand why He made the kaffir and the rinderpest. The Hottentot is a little better. The Hottentot will only steal the biltong hanging out on the line to dry. He won't steal the line as well. That is where the kaffir is different.

Still, sometimes you come across a good kaffir, who is faithful and upright and a true Christian and doesn't let the wild-dogs catch the sheep. I always think that it isn't right to kill that kind of kaffir. (*Mafeking Road* 64)

This is our first introduction to Oom Schalk, and two aspects of his character present themselves most prominently. The first is his seemingly “genocidal racism”¹⁴ (Lenta 114): collating black people with a cattle-destroying plague, and inferring, in the passage's final line, that the killing of black people is the acceptable norm to this community. The second is his qualified religiousness: he asserts from the outset his “respect” for God's creations and His law, but admits that the existence of black people presents a considerable challenge to this. Schalk's honesty in this regard is perhaps intended to strike the listener as evidence of his sincerity elsewhere.

In Schalk's arbitrary and stereotyped racial schema, “Hottentots” are classified as slightly superior to “kaffirs” because, it is suggested, they maintain certain moral scruples which “kaffirs” do not. The mention of “Hottentots” at all may seem puzzling here in a story dedicated exclusively to the examination of the character of the “kaffir” – although it does serve a certain thematic purpose in firmly establishing the “kaffir's” position at the lowest rung of Schalk's racial hierarchy – but it has been suggested that this is a metafictional ‘nod’ to Bosman's friend Aegidius Jean Blignaut and his fictional narrator, the “Hottentot” Ruiter.¹⁵

¹⁴ It should perhaps be noted here that the use of the word “kaffir”, as unacceptable as it is today, would not necessarily have raised even the most liberal eyebrows in 1930. Gray refers to Bosman's use of “the k-word” as “historically correct” (2005:36); and Sarah Gertrude Millin, a contemporaneous commentator, suggested that the mark of a ‘true’ racist of the time was the use of the word “nigger”. She writes:

The sort of person who speaks of a Kaffir or a Negro as a nigger is sometimes merely careless and casual, but almost always he stamps himself as one untouched by the decencies of living and the subtleties of culture. (*The South Africans*, 276)

¹⁵ This kind of playful intertextual gesture was reciprocated by Blignaut. The opening to the story “Campfires”, for instance, reads as follows:

Even at this early stage, however, certain narrative dissonances must surely catch the attention of the alert reader. Equating “kaffirs” with a cattle-killing plague is absurd; but this on its own cannot necessarily be read as proof of anything other than the ignorant racism it appears to be. Given that apartheid politicians routinely produced more ludicrous metaphors than this to describe the social threat presented by black people, it is possible that original readers of the story would not have found this kind of wording particularly jarring in comparison with the ‘standard’ racist discourse of the time. There are, however, already two internal contradictions evident in this passage which may be of significance. The first is the conflict between Schalk’s professed deep religious faith and his implied willingness to accept the killing of all black people except the odd few who provide practical services, such as those who adequately protect his sheep from attack. This represents hypocrisy on a breathtaking scale; and although one may argue again that it was common practice for apartheid thinkers to justify their racist policies with bastardisations of Christian theology, and thus quite plausible that Schalk is similarly blindly hypocritical, the bald-faced tone of Schalk’s final comment suggests a narrator who may indeed be aware of the ideological chasm that separates the assertion “I fear the Almighty, and I respect His works” from the statement “I always think it isn’t right to kill that kind of kaffir”, and is exploiting that gap for humorous effect. It is, at this stage, too early for us to make a decision either way.

In support of the latter possibility, however, a second narrative dissonance presents itself. Oom Schalk’s opening statement announces that “kaffirs” are “all the same”. Just a few utterances later, however, he proceeds to discuss a rare sub-section of “kaffirs” – the “good” ones. “All kaffirs”, it appears, then, are *not* the same; and, again, Schalk’s reasoning is revealed as laughably flawed. Again, however, we lack sufficient evidence to decide whether this is a deliberate narrative technique on Schalk’s part, or not.

Schalk Lourens? Yes, I know him (Hottentot Ruiters said). He has blue eyes and a long beard, but I don’t think the old song, ‘Die vaal hare en die blou oe’ was made up about him; though he’s gay when it’s played on the concertina at a vastrap.

[...]

I often wonder when he’s going to trek to a district where he won’t have to compete with me. Meanwhile, he gets my stories cheap, then pretends they are not second-hand, because he has added bits about himself to them on the quiet. (*Dead End Road* 94)

Schalk's narrative continues: "I remember about one kaffir we had, by the name of Nongaas. How we got him was after this fashion" (64). The fact that this follows directly after Schalk's musings about "good kaffirs" leads one to make the (correct) assumption that this anecdote may provide some elucidation on what, in Schalk's opinion, sets a "good kaffir" apart from a "bad" one. Modern readers may shudder at the proprietary phrasing – "one kaffir we *had*"; "how we *got* him" – but there is, as yet, no hint of a self-questioning inflection in Schalk's use of such terminology.

The anecdote that follows tells how Schalk's family came about 'acquiring' Nongaas, who is a mere "picannin" when the Lourens family encounter him while trekking into the Dwarsberge. While Schalk's father barterers "two sacks of mealies for a roll of tobacco" (64) – a clearly unequal exchange, and, as such, a narrative detail intended to suggest either the ignorance and lack of sophistication of the black people involved in the trade, or the exploitative bent of the white visitors – Nongaas emerges from a hut and takes an instant interest in Schalk's immaculately-attired brother Hendrik. The Lourens family leave the cluster of huts and trek on until late in the afternoon; whereupon they discover that Nongaas has followed them. Hendrik reacts with what appears to be the reflex action of a white man to a black child in the Marico community: he "shouted at him to go home, and started throwing stones at him" (65). Schalk's father, however, is "merciful" (65); and after hearing how Nongaas has been orphaned by lion attacks on his parents, he agrees that "he could stay with us, but he must be good, and not tell lies and steal, like the other kaffirs" (65).

Nongaas, as the years go by, reveals himself to be "very good" (65) indeed. His hero-worship of Schalk's brother persists and intensifies into something approaching deification: Schalk comments that "I could see that whenever Nongaas thought of God, he was really only thinking of Hendrik" (65). Here, although most readers would find this sentiment insultingly paternalistic and condescending in the extreme, it must be noted that there is, again, no textual evidence pointing to the fact that Schalk shares this view.

A few sentences later, however, when relating the story of how Hermanus Potgieter and his family have been killed by "a kaffir tribe under Makapan" (65), Schalk comments as follows:

They also said that after killing him, the kaffirs stripped off old Potgieter's skin and made wallets out of it to carry the dagga. It was very wicked of the kaffirs to have done that, especially as dagga makes you mad and it is a sin to smoke it. (65)

This statement, in its suggestion that it is a more heinous sin to smoke dagga than to murder, is an overtly ridiculous one. Despite the fact that we have evidence of the religious hypocrisy of the Marico community, which Schalk may well endorse up to a point, it seems straining the limits of reasonable credulity to suggest that Schalk would be unaware of the farcical nature of a moral creed which condemns drug-use more harshly than the taking of life. Schalk's subsequent statement – "A commando was called up from our district to go and attack the tribe and teach them to have respect for the white man's skin" (65) – must thus be read as containing some form of critique of this course of action. If Schalk wholeheartedly approved of retaliatory combat in this case, it would be a very simple matter for him to phrase his description of its aims in a manner which lent substantiation and validity to their mission, instead of undermining it entirely.

We find similar evidence to support claims for a sly 'wink' from Schalk to the reader in the words of Schalk's father as Schalk and Hendrik set off for Makapan, accompanied by the faithful Nongaas:

"Don't forget to read your Bible, my sons," he called out as we rode away. "Pray the Lord to help you, and when you shoot always aim for the stomach." These remarks were typical of my father's deeply religious nature, and he also knew that it was easier to hit a man in the stomach than in the head. (66)

In response to this passage, Gillian Siebert suggests

In this first story, he is a naïve narrator and accepts without question the values of his community, as his comment at his father's advice shows. One might say that he has not yet developed a tendency to wink. (28)

It is MacKenzie's view, however, which I share, that at this point Schalk "cannot be interpreted as being anything other than self-consciously ironic" (1999:146). The obvious paradox here, of the notion of a "deeply religious man" who advocates the most

inhumane and merciless manner of killing again savagely exposes the hypocrisies of this community, and the likelihood is that Schalk is quite aware of this.

The condemnation of religious double-standards continues: when Schalk describes the situation at Makapan, where the “kaffirs” have been besieged in a number of caves, he comments that a lot of them “had guns, which they had bought from the illicit traders and the missionaries”(67). Schalk also makes a point of noting that those starving to death inside the caves are “the whole tribe, men, women and children” (66). The mention of “women and children” here – virtually guaranteed to elicit compassion from the average reader – would be an easy detail to omit: its inclusion can possibly be perceived as a hint of which group Schalk’s sympathies truly lie with.

With most of the “kaffirs” dead of starvation after a week, a decision is taken to finish off the massacre, and Hendrik joins Paul Kruger in storming the caves from one side, while Schalk advances from the other with Piet Potgieter’s commando. Before the men set off, Nongaas begs Hendrik to be allowed to accompany him in order to protect him, but Hendrik laughs off the suggestion and instructs him to stay behind and cook dinner: an order Nongaas dutifully heeds. Both commandos are subsequently defeated; Schalk reports that “they had shot many kaffirs, but there were still hundreds of them left, who fought all the more fiercely with hunger gnawing at their bellies” (68). It is impossible to ignore, here, the note of admiration – however grudging we may take it to be – in Schalk’s voice, in describing the bravery of the “kaffirs” under siege.

When Schalk returns to camp, he finds, to his horror, that Hendrik has not returned. Others report that he “was right in amongst the foremost of the attackers” (68); and now, it appears likely, is lying injured in the cave. Schalk requests a party of men to seek Hendrik out, but his request is denied. Nongaas is inconsolable, and after a few hours sets out on his own:

He said nothing to me, but I knew he was going to look for my brother Hendrik. Nongaas knew that if his baas was still alive he would need him. So he went to him. That was all. (69)

The abrupt, truncated sentences here – significant in terms of Booth’s warning to be alert to “clashes of style” – suggest one of three things. It may be that they are intended to

represent the simplicity and fragmentation of a “kaffir’s” way of thinking, and in this sense, it is a fairly pejorative representation, designed to highlight the futility of his quest due to his ignorant foolhardiness. More likely than this, in my opinion, is the possibility that we are supposed to infer something positive about the dogged devotion to duty, even against overwhelming odds, that characterises his nature. A final, rather less plausible option is the possibility that the staccato phrases are intended to suggest a disruption in Schalk’s oral performance as he is overcome by emotion; but this would be most unsubtle and incongruous.

Schalk’s subsequent statement appears to lend credence to the second interpretation adumbrated above, by laying emphasis on Nongaas’s courage:

I supposed it was his intention to lie in wait near one of the caves and then crawl inside when the night came. That was a very brave thing to do. If Makapan’s kaffirs saw him they would be sure to kill him, because he was helping the Boers against them, and also because he was a Bechuana. (69)

At the same time as this comment affirms the bravery of an individual “kaffir”, however, it simultaneously offers a critique – however ill-informed – of the insular, primitive tribalism of the *other* “kaffirs”. The fact that “Makapan’s kaffirs” would be willing to murder Nongaas for simply being born into a different ‘tribe’ is clearly analogous with the racism of the Marico farmers, and as such, equally condemnatory. The point is, however, that this is Schalk’s potentially skewed perception of the matter as an outsider, as opposed to his ‘authentic’ insider position in the Marico community; and, given the ‘unreliability’ of his narrative in other respects, it is unclear how much validity this notion holds.

The reader may, at this point, draw an unflattering comparison between Schalk’s behaviour and that of Nongaas. Despite Schalk’s self-stated awareness of the fact that Nongaas will almost certainly die in the cave, he allows him to venture forth without protestation. Schalk waits a full day before following in Nongaas’s footsteps; and even after reaching a cave (from a safe distance – “about two hundred yards” [69]), Schalk, in characteristically lazy fashion, falls asleep behind a rock: “for I was very weary with the anxiety and through not having slept the night before” (70). As is the case with Schalk’s cowardice in war in the story “Yellow Moepels”, discussed previously, however,

Schalk's need to save face with his implied audience would preclude the possibility that he *intends* us to make the inference that his lack of action stems from fear. This, then, is another example of an understanding that Bosman shares with the reader without Schalk's 'permission'.

What eventually stirs Schalk from his inertia is the sudden appearance of a "kaffir" at the cave's entrance. Frightened that this individual will alert others to Schalk's presence, Schalk shoots him in the stomach, as per his father's advice, and is relieved to note that "he fell over like a sack of potatoes" (70). Knowing that time is limited before other "kaffirs" arrive on the scene, Schalk – never one to pass up an opportunity to emphasise the few heroic aspects of his behaviour – "take[s] a great risk" (70) and runs into the cave to find Hendrik. Strengthened by the knowledge that "the Lord would lead me aright" (70) (and, presumably, overlook the savage killing he has just perpetrated, although there is no explicit textual evidence here that Schalk intends this irony), Schalk hunts for Hendrik until he finds him, rendered immobile by a sprained leg, but otherwise intact. Hendrik tells Schalk how it was Nongaas who found him, carried him and fed him food and water; but Nongaas had to leave him in order to refill the bottle, and Hendrik is "so frightened they may kill him" (71). Schalk attempts to reassure him, but without much conviction, "for the caves were many and dark, and the kaffirs were blood-mad" (71). It is this statement, which I shall return to shortly, which possibly presents the most damaging and incisive irony of the narrative, once the story's ending is revealed.

Hendrik continues:

"You know," he whispered, "Nongaas was crying when he found me. He thought I was dead. He has been very good to me – so very good. Do you remember that day when he followed behind our wagons? He looked so very trustful and so little, and yet I – I threw stones at him. I wish I did not do that. I only hope that he comes back safe. He was crying and stroking my hair."
(71)

The poignancy of these utterances is utterly undermined by Schalk's next callous remark: "As I said, my brother Hendrik was feverish" (71). This, on the surface, appears attributable to the fact that the emotion expressed by Hendrik has unsettled him, as Hendrik's sentiments represent an inappropriate degree of intimacy with a "kaffir". Yet

Schalk, as a storyteller ‘in control’ of his narrative (as we must believe for the stories to have any authenticity) has *chosen* to recount the words of his brother in a tone of uncharacteristically sincere pain. L.H. Hugo might argue that this represents a perfect example of Schalk’s internal conflict between being “a dedicated ‘Kafir-hater’ on the one hand and a scrupulously honest story-teller on the other” (162). The fact is, however, that the story thus far has provided us with such abundant evidence of Nongaas’s self-sacrificial devotion that the ‘average’ reader (as problematic a notion as that is) would surely consider Hendrik’s sentiments entirely justified, rather than effusively histrionic, in this context. Schalk’s comment, then, does not stem necessarily from *honesty*, as it seems very likely that despite his physical ill-health, Hendrik’s response to the situation stems from a position of reasonable lucidity.

In addition, Schalk, as narrator, is *aware* as he utters the words “As I said, my brother Hendrik was feverish” that he is about to deliver the story’s devastating denouement. A “dedicated kafir-hater” Schalk may be, but he is also a story-teller who prides himself on his art and is acutely aware of the criteria for a story’s successful oral performance – as evidenced by his remark, in “Mafeking Road”, that “the important thing is to know just at what moment you must knock out your pipe on your veldskoen” (*Mafeking Road* 53). A comment like the one pertaining to Hendrik’s supposed “feverishness” amounts, in this context, almost to bathos: the story is building to a dramatic crescendo at the point immediately preceding that statement, and its effect is to send the story crashing down to banality.

Why, then, given that chances are good that even a hardened racist might find Hendrik’s comments valid, would Schalk choose to interrupt the fluid construction of his narrative with his jarring interjection? My sense is that it represents another attempt to save face with his fireside audience: to reassure them that, even though they might find *Hendrik’s* feelings despicably soppy, *Schalk* must not be tarred with the same emotional brush (even though evidence elsewhere points to the fact, as we have seen, that Schalk is all too aware of the bigotry and hypocrisy of this very community in which he seeks to entrench his position). I do not think that Schalk’s obsession with face-saving can be taken lightly: his concern with his standing in the community recurs as a prominent theme in many of his stories, and it is plausible that it is this aspect of his narrative that

gives rise to certain statements that critics have often mistakenly taken as evidence of ironic non-awareness.

To return to the original question posed, however, another potential reason for the juxtaposition of Hendrik's poignant fears with Schalk's deflating aside may be simply that Schalk has yet to grow, as a narrator, into the shrewd metafictional awareness he is to display in later stories. At this early stage his concern seems to be simply with relaying the details of an anecdote, without the same overt attention to structure and performance paid in later stories.

Whatever the case, however, there is a sense in which Schalk's dismissive response to Hendrik suits the narrative structure perfectly, in that its banality complements the story's seemingly low-key ending, and renders its horror all the more acute. The story's closing passage reads as follows:

“Of course he will come back,” I answered him. But this time I knew that I lied. For as I came through the mouth of the cave I kicked against the kaffir I had shot there. The body sagged over to one side and I saw the face. (71)

It is the understatement of this ending that gives it its exceptional poignancy. The fact that the “kaffir” shot by Schalk was Nongaas is never explicitly stated: the reader must infer the truth by assessing the statement “this time I knew that I lied” in combination with the words “I saw the face”: the only “kaffir” in this scenario whose face Schalk would recognise would be Nongaas's.

The most devastating piece of irony at work here, alluded to earlier, is that Schalk's initial fear is that the “blood-mad kaffirs” would put an end to Nongaas. The fact that it is *Schalk* who is found to have killed him, in an utterly meaningless squandering of life, operates metonymically for the whole Makapan mission.

Lawson's reading of the story's ending is as follows:

The irony in this for Bosman is different from the irony of the situation as Oom Schalk perceives it. For the latter, the irony is that he has inadvertently wasted a rare ‘good kaffir’. For Bosman, it is that Oom Schalk can only conceive the worth of Nongaas in relation to himself, and to white society as a whole. (148)

My assertion, however, is that it is incorrect to assume that Schalk is unaware of the irony that Lawson suggests Bosman intends, given all the textual evidence pointing in this direction. MacKenzie asserts, in support of this, that “Makapan’s Caves” offers

early signals that Schalk Lourens’s simplicity is only apparent, that he is aware of the hypocritical nature of the society he is describing, and that he is offering veiled indications of this to the reader. (1999:146)

7.3 “Funeral Earth” (1950)

“Funeral Earth” is a useful subject for comparison with “Makapan’s Caves” because it handles a similar theme – illegitimate warfare against black South Africans – in a notably different manner.

The most striking initial difference is its conciseness: in the old Human & Rousseau edition of *Unto Dust* it spans less than six pages, in marked contrast to the length of early stories like “Makapan’s Caves” and, in particular, the second Oom Schalk story to be published, “The Rooinek”, which fills a full 17 pages. This is perhaps some hint that Bosman felt by this time that he had ‘worked out’ the treatment of racial issues with sufficient comprehensiveness in the past to allow for a more condensed handling of the theme here. It is also, perhaps, a signal of the degree to which Bosman believed he had exhausted the potential of the Oom Schalk narrative format, as witnessed by his subsequent shift to the ‘conversation piece’ formula of the “Voorkamer” series.

The story’s opening line is further evidence of the greater economy with which Bosman was framing the Oom Schalk stories by this time. As evinced by the prefatory statement to “Makapan’s Caves”, Oom Schalk’s technique for introducing a topic in the early stories tends to take the form of a generalised statement on a matter, followed by a (supposedly) confirmatory anecdote dealing with the same subject. “Funeral Earth”, on the other hand, sees Oom Schalk launching into a reminiscence without any wider contextual framing at all: “We had a difficult task, that time (Oom Schalk Lourens said), teaching Sijefu’s tribe of Mtosas to become civilised” (*Unto Dust* 108).

A reader of the series by now familiar with Oom Schalk’s *modus operandi* might instantly be alerted to the potential ambiguity of the word “civilised” in this context; but

an inexperienced reader might not suspect anything ideologically questionable is afoot initially (beyond the obviously problematic notion of “teaching” civilisation, that is). The two statements that follow, however, present a challenge to any ‘reasonable’ or logical thinking:

But they did not show any appreciation. Even after we had set fire to their huts in a long row around the slopes of Abjaterskop, so that you could see the smoke almost as far as Nietverdiend, the Mtosas remained just about as unenlightened as ever. (108)

The notion that one would be expected to express “appreciation” for having one’s house destroyed is nonsensical, as Schalk is aware; particularly given that in an early story of the series, “Veld Fire”, the devastating effects of fire on Schalk’s own farm are recorded in a fairly ‘serious’ and poignant manner. Schalk’s comment that the Mtosas “remained just about as unenlightened as ever”, in the wake of the fire, must be read as heavily sarcastic, then, particularly if one factors in the pun at work.

The subsequent dialogue that Schalk records, between the Veldkornet Andries Joubert and young Fanie Louw, which takes place when Schalk’s commando comes to a halt in a clearing while attempting to track down the Mtsosas who have taken refuge in the bush, is a comical reflection of the cowardice of the Boers involved. Louw, in reference to Joubert’s claim that he can “*smell* when there are kaffirs lying in wait with assegais” (108), comments that “The stabbing assegai has got more of a selons-rose sort of smell about it than a throwing spear. The selons-rose that you come across in graveyards” (108). This hint at the possibility of their imminent death is, understandably, not received well; Schalk comments seemingly disparagingly on Louw’s ability to “think out a lot of nonsense to say just on the spur of the moment”, but admiringly notes the Veldkornet’s next statement:

Indeed, from the very next thing Veldkornet Joubert said, you could see how deep was his insight. And he did not have to think much, either, then.

“Let us get out of here as quick as hell, men,” he said, speaking very distinctly. “Perhaps the kaffirs are hiding out in the open turf-lands, where there are no trees. And none of this long tamboekie grass, either.” (108/109)

Schalk's relief at the prospect of moving to an area of greater safety makes it quite probable that his appreciation for Joubert's *decision* is quite sincere. Joubert's *motivation*, however – that it is more likely that the “kaffirs” will be “hiding” out in full view – is transparently nonsense, and Schalk is fully aware of the absurdity of this notion. When his commando emerges from the bush only to encounter a similar group who had “hit on the same strategy”, his comment is:

You could see that Veldkornet Joubert was pleased to think that he had, on his own, worked out the same tactics as Combrinck, who was known as a skilful kaffir-fighter. All the same, it seemed as though this was going to be a long war. (109)

This admission – that “it seemed as though this was going to be a long war” – is significant in that it conveys Schalk's sense of the endeavour's futility in a more overt manner than one would expect to find in earlier stories tackling a similar theme. Schalk does not, of course, articulate this thought openly to the commando at the time; but it now becomes apparent that the impertinent voice of Fanie Louw has been introduced as a device to verbalise ideas which, we may infer, probably tally very closely with Schalk's own interior monologue at the time:

It was then that, again speaking out of his turn, Fanie Louw said that all we needed now was for the commandant himself to arrive there in the middle of the turf-lands with the main body of burghers. “Maybe we should even go back to Pretoria to see if the Mtosas aren't perhaps hiding in the Volksraad,” he said. “Passing laws and things. You know how cheeky a Mtosa is.” (109)

Louw here exposes both the cowardice which underlies the decision to move out of the thickly-vegetated area and the fallacy of the ‘threat’ posed by the “cheeky” Mtosas. The reference to the Volksraad, in particular, and the ironic humour inherent in the notion of a Mtosa being able to sneak in to pass legislation, is clearly intended to draw attention to the total lack of political clout held by this marginalized group. Schalk's apparently disapproving tone in recounting this – evidenced by his emphasis on the fact that Fanie Louw is “again speaking out of his turn” – is undercut by the fact that Schalk has just

expressed, in however comparatively subtle a manner, his own dissatisfaction with the war.

Schalk's commando subsequently decides to bed down for the night in the open grass:

It was muddy in the turf-lands, and there was no fire-wood there, but we all said that we did not mind. We would not pamper ourselves by going to sleep in the thick bush, we told one another. It was war time, and we were on commando, and the mud of the turf-lands was good enough for *us*, we said. (109)

Here the textual emphasis on the communal pronoun *we*, and particularly the notion of “[telling] one another”, suggests a conscious group attempt to verbally assert control over their situation: to convince each other, despite shared awareness that the contrary is true, that the decision is being made on honourable grounds and is not, once more, stemming from plain cowardice. The obsession with in-group face-saving is thus apparent again; and the implication is that a lie constructed in concert holds a legitimacy which an individually-manufactured falsehood lacks. In this case, then, it is not merely *Schalk* who is aware of the reality of the situation, but the group as a whole; and this fact makes it safely exploitable for obvious comic effect.

Before the group can safely fall asleep, however, a strange sight greets them: a group of Mtosas unhurriedly, and with no attempt at concealment, advancing towards them:

And we observed, even from that distance, that they were unarmed. Instead of assegais and shields they carried burdens on their heads. And almost in that same moment we realised, from the heavy look of those burdens, that the carriers must be women. (109/110)

The idea advanced by the passage's final sentence can be read in two ways: either as a sincere compliment, in the sense that only women would be capable of shouldering such a taxing load; or as ironic commentary on the fact that it would be only sensible for the men of the tribe to order the women to fulfil this gruelling task. If we are to choose between the two on the basis of our past familiarity with Schalk's views, we must

privilege the latter: this is the same narrator, after all, who expresses the view in “Veld Maiden” that “I have always believed that [looking after one’s cattle and pigs] is more important in a farmer than that he should be kind to his wife and his kaffirs” (*Mafeking Road* 122). Schalk’s next comment supports this: “For that reason we took our guns in our hands and stood waiting. Since it was women, we were naturally prepared for the lowest form of treachery” (110).

Discerning irony in this type of misogynistic statement from Schalk is problematic because it is rarely accompanied by the kind of textual undermining or explicit internal contradictions which Schalk’s other obviously bigoted views are accorded: indeed, there are countless examples of genuinely “treacherous” female figures within the Oom Schalk stories. Our decision to read this statement as ironic, then, is based on nothing more than either the reader’s generalised distrust of such sweeping statements, whatever the subject; or the reader’s decision to reject the unpalatable overt meaning in order to give credence to conventional stereotypes of women as peace-loving and law-abiding. Either way, we cannot claim with certainty from the evidence of the text alone that Schalk himself intends this as irony.

The Mtosa group is not exclusively comprised of women, however; at its head is the Chief’s counsellor, an old man named Ndambe. It is Ndambe who addresses the Boer commando:

He declared that white men were kings among kings and elephants among elephants. He also said that we were ringhals snakes more poisonous and generally disgusting than any ringhals snake in the country. (110)

The first noteworthy point about Ndambe’s address is the humorousness of the comment that white men are “kings among kings and elephants among elephants”. The point here – which is, needless to say, entirely lost on Schalk’s commando – is that the conventional version of this praise formula would emphasise the *superiority* of those being addressed in comparison to their wider context, and particularly to the group issuing the praise; and it would normally thus read something like “kings among peasants”. To state that the white men are “kings among kings”, then, is merely to stress their *equality* with their black co-habitants of the land.

Ndambe's second statement, which compares the white men to venomous snakes, in terms of destructiveness and toxicity, is explicitly insulting; but far from taking offence, the commando members are positively pleased – assuming they are being paid a compliment in an “ignorant Mtosa fashion” (110). The only ignorance at work here, of course, is that of the Boers. Their blinkered bigotry precludes them from considering that they might not be received with the “appreciation” alluded to in the story's opening. However, Schalk's ironic choice of the word “ignorant” reveals *his* understanding of the Mtosas' true meaning.

When Ndambe proceeds to compare the Boers to “the spittle of a green tree toad” (110), however, even the most complacent among the burghers begin to feel uneasy; and Veldkornet Joubert, with the aid of a pointed gun, instructs Ndambe to “come to the point” (110). The “point”, it emerges, is that the Mtosas have come to make peace:

At a sign from Ndambe the column knelt in the mud of the turf land. They brought lion and zebra skins and elephant tusks, and beads and brass bangles and, on a long mat, the whole haunch of a red Afrikaner ox, hide and hoof and all. And several pigs cut in half. And clay pots filled to the brim with white beer. And also – and this we prized most – witchdoctor medicines that protected you against *goël* spirits at night and the evil eye. (110)

The only indication of the Boer response to these offerings lies in Schalk's mention that the witchdoctor medicines were prized *most*: which marks out which element of the gift the burghers perceive as most precious, but also suggests that *all* the gifts are “prized” to a certain degree. There is an obvious irony in the fact that it is the witchdoctor medicines which are deemed most valuable, given that it follows the burghers' amused and patronising noting of the “ignorant”, “tribal” customs of the Mtosas: yet clearly they are similarly susceptible to superstition and must, however reluctantly, acknowledge the efficacy of traditional measures in combatting supernatural powers in a way that “civilised”, “white” medicine cannot. Gillian Siebert suggests that the significance of Schalk's positive appraisal of this ‘muti’ lies in the fact that “never before has he so explicitly acknowledged the common humanity of black and white, let alone manifested a sense of shared identity with his dark-skinned fellow South Africans” (102).

There is one further Mtosa gift to come:

A woman with a clay pot on her head rose up from the kneeling column and advanced towards us. We saw then that what she had in the pot was black earth. It was wet and almost like turf soil. (110)

Schalk's claim is that this offering is greeted with bemusement:

We couldn't understand what they wanted to bring us that for. As though we didn't have enough of it, right there where we were standing and sticking to our veldskoens, and all. (110)

The Boers' inability to perceive the symbolic nature of the gift should be unsurprising to a reader who has been exposed to, for instance, this community's intense distrust of any 'artist' figures who emerge from within it, as evidenced in earlier stories like "The Music Maker" and "Veld Maiden"; they are a resolutely practical people. The Boers cannot understand why the Mtosas should consider a pot of soil – a substance so freely available all around them – as a *gift* to them. To the Mtosas, however, it represents an offer to coexist peacefully on shared earth: earth, moreover, which it is their *right* to make a gift of, seeing as it has 'belonged' to them in a far more legitimate manner for far longer than the Afrikaners.

Schalk's reaction to the gift appears to be one of some confusion: "And yet Ndambe acted as though that was the most precious part of the peace offerings that his chief, Sijefu, had sent us" (111). There is no explicit textual evidence pointing to the fact that Oom Schalk may not be as perplexed here as he appears; and he prefaces Ndambe's next statement by offering it as unequivocal proof of "how ignorant he and his chief and the whole Mtosa tribe were, really" (111). Ndambe claims that the Mtosas are "honoured" to be waging war against such worthy opponents because in the past they "had only had flat-faced Mshangaans with spiked knobkerries to fight against" (111). This is surely meant with ironic intention; and the fact that Schalk and the rest of the Boer commando continue to attribute it to Mtosa "ignorance" shows all too clearly whose ignorance is *really* being exposed. The Boers are the clear butt of the Mtosa joke here; and their failure to perceive it is the source of the humour for the reader.

Ndambe continues as follows:

Ndambe said, simply, that the Mtosas would be glad if we came and made war against them later on, when the harvests had been gathered in. But in the meantime the tribe did not wish to continue fighting.

It was the time for sowing.

Ndambe let the soil run through his fingers, to show us how good it was. He also invited us to taste it. We declined. (111)

This attempt of the Mtosas to draw attention to the pointlessness of this war at a time of harvest is greeted by the Boers with total equanimity: “We accepted his presents and peace was made” (111), Schalk reports immediately. This is somewhat surprising, since our prior familiarity with the *modus operandi* of the Boers in wartime has given us no reason to assume that they would be moved by a plea for clemency. We are not provided with any indication of the fact that Ndambe’s words may have had any kind of profound effect on the Boers – as much as we may wish to assume this – or that any kind of discussion on the matter ensued. It is tempting to believe that Ndambe’s use of a mutually-understood and appreciated discourse – that of farming – has won the Boers over, being the very earth-based people they are; but other evidence points to the idea that we are probably intended to attribute this sudden cooperation on the Boers’ side to the fact that the *full* extent of the Mtosas’ ignorance has now been exposed and the Boers consider them too patently ridiculous to bother engaging with further. This is substantiated by the Veldkornet’s summation of the situation: “And I can still remember how Veldkornet Joubert shook his head and said, “Can you beat the Mtosas for ignorance?” (111). Of interest here is the emphasis Schalk places on his mental process of recall – “and I can still remember” – which suggests to the reader that the Veldkornet’s words may take on an ironic significance later. It is also a perfect ‘set-up’ for the parallel structure of the comic line that follows:

And I can still remember what Jurie Bekker said, also. That was when something made him examine the haunch of beef more closely, and he found his own brand mark on it. (111)

To offer the Boers, as a peace-token, their own, stolen meat represents impertinence of the highest kind from the Mtosas; and the detail's inclusion here provides some unfortunate substantiation for the kind of sentiment on 'kaffir' dishonesty expressed in the opening to "Makapan's Caves". It is also, however, a wink to the reader to indicate, again, that the joke is on the Boers: despite their supposed ignorance, the Mtosas have won peace by offering the Boers what rightfully is theirs. The gesture highlights the farcical nature of the war from beginning to end. It is also possible to read it as some form of ironic comment on the wrongful appropriation of land by the Boers, although this would almost certainly represent over-attribution of intention to Schalk.

The story now shifts focus from the Mtosas to the war against the British which the Boer forces must fight shortly afterwards. It is now the Boers' turn to experience being on the losing side of battle; but despite being "in a very bad way" (111), they refuse to capitulate. Many of the men who fought alongside Schalk against the Mtosas are still with him, with Veldkornet Joubert promoted to kommandant (a bad omen from the start), and the irrepressible Fanie Louw still in attendance. Schalk comments:

It was strange how attached we had grown to Fanie Louw during the years of hardship that we went through together in the field. But up to the end we had to admit that, while we had got used to his jokes, and we knew there was no harm in them, we would have preferred it that he should stop making them.

He did stop, and for ever, in a skirmish near a block-house. We buried him in the shade of a thorn-tree. (111)

The news of Louw's death is revealed here in a particularly jarring fashion: the expression of affection towards him, juxtaposed with the objection to his jokes, is followed with extreme abruptness by the elliptical revelation of his death. This abruptness in particular suggests the degree of intense emotion underlying the statement. The fact that it is Louw who dies is also rendered more poignant by the fact that it has been he who has dared to voice, in however oblique or apparently humorous a manner, objections to the fighting throughout. The loss of this lone dissenting voice bleakly exposes the waste and futility of warfare, with the fact that he is buried beneath a thorn-tree heightening the barren brutality of this loss of young life. In addition, the fact that, as noted previously, Louw's presence in the story clearly functions as some kind of more

vocal alter ego for Schalk means that his loss can also be said to symbolise, perhaps, the loss of a younger, more idealistic self for Schalk.

Schalk reminds the listeners that at funerals of this kind¹⁶ mourners would take it in turns to drop a handful of earth into the grave, and he describes Kommandant Joubert's offering as follows:

When Kommandant Joubert stooped down and picked up his handful of earth, a strange thing happened. And I remembered that other war, against the Mtosas. And we knew – although we would not say it – what was now that longing in the heart of each of us. For Kommandant Joubert did not straightaway drop the soil into Fanie Louw's grave. Instead he kneaded the damp ground between his fingers. It was as though he had forgotten that it was funeral earth. He seemed to be thinking not of death, then, but of life. (112)

The "longing in the heart of each of us" is not defined. Its textual linking to the war against the Mtosas, however, is revealing, as it suggests a new sympathy with the views of the Mtosas – a notion confirmed by Joubert's echoing of the gesture previously performed by Ndambe. It is a longing for the earth; a longing to return to their farms, and the simple, natural way of life in harmonious communion with the soil. It is, above all, a longing to stop the spilling of blood on the soil and re-commence the sowing of seed in it; a desire to reclaim the ground as a locus of life and growth rather than death and destruction.

The story's last lines make explicit Schalk's new and sympathetic understanding of what it was that Ndambe attempted to convey to the Boers:

We patterned after him, picking up handfuls of soil and pressing it together. We felt the deep loam in it, and saw how springy it was, and we let it trickle through our fingers. And we could remember only that it was the time for sowing.

I understood then how, in an earlier war, the Mtosas had felt, they who were also farmers. (112)

¹⁶ This is another example of the degree to which Bosman had perfected the economical framing of the stories by this time: here the words "As you know..." are all that is required to bring the information about funeral customs to the attention of the reader without it seeming like an inauthentic and unnecessary assertion to the fireside audience.

Thus “Funeral Earth” ends: not with a bang, but (if not quite a whimper), in a very understated manner indeed in comparison to many of the stories that precede its publication in the Oom Schalk series. There is no gimmicky denouement here; no “small and unexpected detail, mentioned casually in the introductory section” (Gray 1986:15) which recurs at the end to provide a kind of key to the story’s meaning. Neither is there any indication that Bosman’s, and the reader’s, understanding of the story’s ‘true’ message may differ from that of Oom Schalk and his fireside audience. Schalk’s regret is clear: he makes explicit his new understanding of the Mtosas’ meaning. Schalk’s tone, in these concluding lines, appears to be one of fatigue: he is no longer attempting to cloak his weariness at the struggle for the land in irony. Our sense may be that this weariness extends to Bosman too, as the author approaches what he considers to be the limit of the fireside tale format’s potential as a narrative framing device.

7.4 Conclusion

L.H. Hugo notes the following about the conclusion of another Schalk Lourens story from the same time, treating a similar theme:

The credo with which he begins “Makapan’s Caves” is the credo nineteen years later in “Unto Dust”, though less baldly expressed, and the accompanying doubts and perplexities, though more pronounced, remain as far from final resolution as ever. (162)

I have already argued that Schalk’s citing of the racist credo which introduces “Makapan’s Caves” is performed with knowing ironic intention. It is my assertion, then, that nineteen years later, Schalk’s critique has merely become more overt and less disguised; that he has largely exhausted his ability to ‘wink’, as it were. This in itself, then, *is* his “final resolution”; and with the slipping of Schalk’s perpetually-perplexed mask, and the concomitant loss of the complexity provided by the question of the distance between Schalk and Bosman, the Oom Schalk Lourens series has outlasted its usefulness.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show that the ironies of the Oom Schalk Lourens series are “unstable” in two ways. The primary locus of instability is within the stories themselves, where, as we have seen, it is often impossible to determine with any certainty where the narrator is positioned, in terms of awareness of irony, in relation to the author and the events of the story. Textual evidence is frequently insufficient to allow us to gauge whether Oom Schalk is aware of the inconsistencies and ironies of his narrative. In accordance with Booth’s instructions, we have consulted extrinsic contexts – Bosman’s non-fiction writings – for guidance, which have largely revealed an author who is often similarly incapable of being pigeonholed in terms of his own ironic stance. More importantly, we have turned to other Oom Schalk stories dealing with similar themes and emerged still uncertain.

This variation in ironic distance between stories is the second form of instability; and makes it difficult to generalise with any accuracy about the Oom Schalk series as a whole – although, as I have attempted to show, there *is* some evidence of a lessening of the ironic gap between Oom Schalk and Bosman in the later stories of the series, albeit in a typically inconsistent fashion.

I have argued that Schalk, even in the earliest stories, is not as unaware of their ironies as some critics have claimed; but, nonetheless, it is a fact that much of the humour of the early stories results from what Snyman describes as an “intimacy between the supposedly more sophisticated English reader and Bosman”, with the jokes at the expense of “the uncouth Oom Schalk” (27). With the closing of this gap in the later stories, the ironies are shared between the reader, the author, and the narrator, with the bigoted Marico community serving largely as the butt of the humour. Schalk’s position in the narrative situation, then, shifts importantly; but, as suggested in the previous chapter, this move comes at a price.

In one of the late stories, “The Story of Hester Van Wyk”, Oom Schalk and fellow farmer Frik Prinsloo are found swapping tall tales of ‘roughing it’ in the veld, while seated in a schoolroom after a local meeting. Their enjoyment of the situation stems largely from the fact that the district’s schoolmaster is present, and clearly

uncomfortable. He finds their stories irritatingly unlikely, and very remote from his own lived experiences: it is a discourse he cannot participate in or fully understand because he has no prior familiarity with it. Aggravating the situation further is the fact that his repeated requests that they cease smoking their pipes (and knocking their ash into the desks' ink-wells) in his classroom go unheeded. Eventually, Schalk reports:

This was one of the stories that I never finished. Because the schoolmaster fell asleep at his table, with the result that he didn't cough anymore, and I could see that because of this Frik Prinsloo could not derive the same amount of amusement from my story. And what is even more strange is that I also found that the funny parts in the story did not sound so funny anymore, now that the schoolmaster was no longer in discomfort. The story seemed to have had much more life in it, somehow, in the earlier stages, when the schoolmaster was anxiously waiting for us to go home, and coughing at intervals through the blue haze of our tobacco smoke. (*Seed-Time and Harvest* 75)

The schoolmaster figure, in both the Oom Schalk stories and the Voorkamer series, is invariably portrayed as young, a little self-important, impossibly idealistic, impractically committed to the task of educating the young minds of the Marico; and, in addition, a perennial outsider, utterly alienated from the wider Marico community in terms of norms and values. We cannot ignore the fact that this is the role that the young Bosman played during his months in the Marico, and as a result, the schoolmaster figure in the stories often seems to function as a jokey acknowledgement of his younger self.

Having said this, then, it is not impossible to read the passage above as somehow symbolic of the shift in narrative situation in the Oom Schalk stories. Much of the humour – as problematic as some may find this – is the result of the implied gulf between the liberal English author and the backward old Afrikaans farmer, with the intention being that the reader align him- or herself with the former.

As we have seen, however, that essential tension is reduced as the series reaches its end, with the discrepancy in overt ideology between Oom Schalk and Bosman becoming almost negligible. The schoolmaster has, so to speak, stopped suffering discomfort from the tall tales and the pipe-smoking, and is now joining the discourse with ease and enjoyment; or, more accurately, Oom Schalk has quit smoking and no longer engages in exaggerated 'back-in-the-day' story-swapping with such relish – with the

result that he and the schoolmaster get along just fine. Some have argued that it is this change that makes the later stories less successful than the earlier offerings. The unevenness and inconsistency of the Oom Schalk stories means, however, that it is impossible to trace a *clear* shift in this regard.

For these two reasons, then – the instability of the ironic situation both *within* and *between* stories – the ironies of the Oom Schalk stories cannot be classified as “stable”. It is certain that this instability has been responsible for many of the mis-readings of the stories in the past.

Bosman wrote the following as a form of pre-emptive caveat to the piece entitled “A Visit to Shanty Town”:

It will be left to the reader to make his own comments, such as “Dastardly” or “Delightful”, depending alike on his own subjective reactions and his capacity for reading between the lines. (*A Cask of Jerepigo* 55)

It is apt advice on how any sensible reader should approach the Oom Schalk series.

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