

equivalent is pleasing to alight in Meadowmount, Connecticut, and partake of the rounds of visits that may be made there. The very oddity of the choice makes us observe, not the fiction of manners in the traditional sense, but a fictional locale where manners must be reinvented daily by the alert and sensitive. Anything less, and Meadowmount would rapidly lapse into the unrelieved barbarity it constantly threatens to be for the protagonists, and what it must really be for denizens less gracious and artful than they.

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Paton's Narrator Sophie: Justice and Mercy in *Too Late the Phalarope*

On its publication in 1953, *Too Late the Phalarope*, Alan Paton's second novel, was greeted with praise.¹ With increasing focus on civil rights, not only in the Union of South Africa but also in the United States, the novel has become even more timely than when it was originally published. Further, Paton's continuing participation in politics and harassment by his own government have focused public attention on his works as social documents. Certainly, his novels are reflections of social injustice. Their importance as social criticism, however, should not blind us to their worth as literature. While traditional standards of literary criticism have been applied to *Cry, the Beloved Country*, *Too Late the Phalarope* has been especially neglected since the publication reviews.

Like *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Paton's second novel reveals a skillful use of traditional techniques of fiction, including point of view. In *Cry, the Beloved Country*, the first-person narrator in the first and third sections is Stephen Kumalo, a Zulu minister who leaves his rural Ixopo to search for his lost son in Johannesburg. In the intervening second section, the narrator is James Jarvis, a wealthy European farmer who is Kumalo's neighbor and whose son Kumalo's son has killed. This double point of view serves to emphasize the two men's parallel spiritual growth, their movement through suffering to self-knowledge and knowledge about their nation. In *Too Late the Phalarope*, Paton also uses a first-person narrator, Sophie, the beloved maiden aunt of the main character, Pieter van Vlaanderen. The novel is composed of Sophie's reflections about her family as she reads sections of a diary Pieter has left her while he is in prison. The novel concerns both the nature of obedience, questioning the morality of a nation's requiring obedience to man-made laws which conflict with God's laws, and also the nature of love, recognizing the unity of body and spirit. Throughout the novel the mercy-justice dichotomy, as it affects obedience and love, is repeatedly dramatized in the action or examined in commentary by either Sophie herself, Pieter's diary, or the young dominee's sermons.

¹(New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953). Subsequent references to this edition are cited in the text. For publication reviews, see Gilbert Highet, "New Books," *Harper's*, 207 (1953), 94, and Edward Weeks, *Atlantic Monthly*, 192 (Sept. 1953), 70; for a more detailed treatment, see Chapter 4 in Edward Callan's *Alan Paton* (New York: Twayne, 1968), pp. 67-84.

Paton suggests in several ways that the narrator's view is the standard by which to judge the characters' concepts of obedience and love. The first clue to Sophie's importance is her name, for her view is indeed that of "wisdom." She describes herself as an observer rather than a participant in life, and she is loved and respected by all the characters. Sophie's position of wisdom is a middle way between two extremes symbolized by Pieter's father, Jakob, whom Pieter recalls as "strict and stern," and his mother, "tender and loving" (p. 84).² Allegorically, the parents seem to represent the stern justice of the Old-Testament God, as opposed to the loving mercy of the New-Testament God, with Pieter as an Everyman searching for the right way. Sophie's position is closer to that of Pieter's mother than his father, but in Sophie we see more strength and questioning than in his mother. Several times Sophie condemns traditional concepts of love and obedience as she recognizes how man's laws can wrongly conflict with God's. About Nella, Pieter's childlike wife, Sophie thinks, "For the mean and the cruel were not destroyed, only the kind and gentle. And God forgive me that I should write such words, which seem to doubt His Providence, but I will be obedient even when the words seem disobedient, and will obey the voice that says to me, what thou seest, write it in a book" (p. 89). And later, "But may God forgive me if what I write is wrong, and against His Laws; for I believe His laws are made in love, and though one does not understand, one should be obedient. And it is because I am obedient that I write these words" (p. 197). Sophie recognizes then the superiority of individual conscience over church dogma or state law.

Unlike Nella, Sophie also understands the nature of love. Nella, reared in the Dutch Reformed Church of the Afrikaner, accepts the Puritan belief in the evil of the body, but Sophie knows that mortal love must include the physical: "Ah, how great is God's gift of love, that love which is of body and mind and soul, and what should she who had it, not understand, and why should I understand who never had it?" (p. 197).

Sophie's wisdom becomes especially apparent where her commentary on a scene follows her reading of sections in Pieter's diary which dramatize that scene. Paton frequently juxtaposes Sophie's view as an observer with Pieter's feelings as they appear to Sophie as she watches him; then in turn Paton juxtaposes Pieter's apparent emotions with Sophie's later understanding of Pieter's actual emotions. Thus, although Paton does not employ two separate narrators as in his first novel, he achieves in this second novel a similar irony or recognition of discrepancies between appearance and reality by juxtaposing two characters' views of the same event. For example, the reader hears through Sophie the young Dominee Vos's two sermons about mercy and obedience. Then the reader sees through her eyes Pieter's response to the sermon and reexperiences with her Pieter's self-hate as she reads his diary. Similarly, at the birthday party for Jakob, the reader learns first in Pieter's diary of the visit of Stephanie, Pieter's black lover, and then reads Sophie's commentary as she recognizes that Stephanie is the cause of Pieter's suffering. In another illustration of the dual view, Sophie describes her pride at watching Pieter play rugby and her lack of understanding of Pieter's suspicious actions. In a succeeding section, the reader learns with Sophie of Pieter's fear that the young recruit Vorster knows of Pieter's liaison with Stephanie. In all three examples, the juxtaposition of sections of Pieter's diary with Sophie's commentary is effective because it allows the reader to learn with Sophie of Pieter's increasing agony, and it thus emphasizes the contrast between appearance and reality in Pieter's life.

²Of Pieter's mother, Sophie says, "if ever a mother was all love, it was she" (p. 4).

Paton's placing Sophie between Pieter and the reader, just as his placing Pieter's philosophy between that of his parents, is an effective method of achieving aesthetic distance, which he achieves in *Cry, the Beloved Country* by expressing his own views through the manuscript of Arthur Jarvis or by dramatizing his views through Stephen Kumalo's odyssey. What then can we conclude about Paton's own opinion of the South-African conflicts between mercy and justice and between obedience and love? He condemns those laws and mores which inculcate hard justice without tempering it with love. That Captain Massingham and Sophie must go outside legal and familial restriction to show their love for Pieter suggests that acts of mercy or compassion must be committed outside the law or social approval. Does Paton suggest in this novel that there is hope for positive change? Despite Pieter's imprisonment for breaking the morality act, Paton seems to suggest some hope; Pieter's mother and Sophie reopen the family home after his father's death. Perhaps love and mercy will one day prevail.

Studying the narrator's position shows us the value of the novel as a work of psychological as well as sociological truth. As Pieter's dilemma and his anguish are recorded and examined by Sophie with a poignant sensitivity without sentimentality, the characters are seen as not only South African but human.

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