
Too Distant the Phalarope:
The Consequences of Negative Values on South African
Society

Thomas Smith

15 May, 2003

In Alan Paton's book *Too Late the Phalarope*, the racism, sexism, and shame present in South African society destroy one of its most prominent members. In South Africa, it is safe to be a racist, it is safe to insist on the "proper" roles for men and women, and it is imperative to avoid shame in order to remain safe. But, Paton says, these are all negative values that hurt society.

In order to protect its citizens, the government of South Africa in 1927 (before the plot of the story begins) makes the law "that no white man might touch a black woman, nor might any white woman be touched by a black man," (261; 25). By armoring themselves with law, the whites of South Africa make themselves feel safe from any mingling with the natives of the land. The Apartheid laws reflect the feelings of the people, or at least the

white people, of the nation at the time. The thought of mixing the races is terrifying to the Afrikaners. This fact is established very early in the book: when Pieter tells Nella that the boy Dick chases a black girl, she says, “to think he was in this house,” (27), emphasizing the intense revulsion Afrikaners feel against those who break this law.

Also early in the book, the Smith family is discussed. Smith violates the Immorality Act. “So great was [Mrs. Smith’s] own fear, or so did [Smith] impart his own to her, that they agreed to add to the terror, and planned the girl’s death,” (46). The fact that they premeditate the murder implies that they feel that murder is a less serious crime than infidelity to the race. Before the law, the latter is obviously worse—it can carry the death penalty (45) as opposed to “a year, two years” (24) for the former. But in the minds of the people, Immorality carries “a sentence for life” (24). Therefore, the Smiths commit murder.

Returning to the Immorality Act itself, it is interesting to note that it is sexist as well as racist. It is phrased: “that no white man might touch a black woman, nor might any white woman be touched by a black man,” (25). The meaning of this law could be phrased much more naturally by using a parallel structure such as “no white man might touch a black woman, nor might any black man touch a white woman.” Instead, the second clause is put into the passive voice, with the white woman as the subject. In both clauses, the Afrikaner is the subject, and the man acts. This is not entirely consistent with the action of the book: the third, fatal time Pieter breaks the law, it is actually because Stephanie seduces him, but he is the one who faces the most consequences.

The most significant case of sexism in the book is that practiced against Pieter by

Jakob, his father. In his childhood, Pieter does things considered both boyish and girlish: he can “outride and outshoot them all” (10), yet he has “a passion for books and learning, and a passion for the flowers” (11). When he acts in a way considered girlish, Jakob directs him toward more manly activities. For example, once in his childhood he is reading a book while his friends play outside, when his father comes and tells him to go join the boys shooting at tins on a stump. “Then [Pieter] took the gun from one of the neighbours’ boys, and fired three times at the tins, and shot them all down from the stump,” (10). His father does not like the breadth of Pieter’s personality: “Had he been one or the other [masculine or feminine], I think his father would have understood him better, but he was both,” (11).

Jakob, therefore, tries to shape him into a man. One of Pieter’s “feminine” activities is stamp collecting. Jakob takes the stamps away for three years, because Pieter was not first in his class when he was fourteen:

“My brother told me to put the stamps away, because they were interfering with the boy’s education. . . . [Pieter] stood there before his father, as though a great hurt were being done to him that he had not deserved. And all the girl came out of him then, and looked out of his unbelieving eyes, that could not see how such a thing could be done.” (37)

Pieter is deeply hurt, but Jakob accomplishes his aim: Pieter acts more masculine from then on. “When the boy came back he was silent. That was the day when he first armoured himself, against hurts and the world, for to his mother and me he said never a word,” (38)—A man would not complain to his mother and his aunt of the hurt he feels, so Pieter does

not.

When he receives his stamps back again, rather than opening his parcel in front of his father, he simply places it in his lap—“whether by fear or constraint or hurt, I do not know,” (39). His mother takes him and the stamps to his room, and makes him open the parcel. “Then he was moved and wept like a girl, and she comforted him, and they looked at the stamps. But he never brought them out again; he kept them always in his room,” (39). Here, Paton uses metonymy to imply more than is actually said. The stamps and the weeping represent all that is feminine in his life: he keeps them inside the door of his room, and he stays inside his armour. The word “armour” (38) is significant, because it implies that this placing of the feminine behind masculine armour is for protection—for safety.

Safety also lies in the traditional feminine roles for women. Nella, for example, is “shy and chaste, as most of [South Africa’s] country girls are,” (53). It is significant that Paton mentions that most country girls are chaste, because it implies that she is chaste because of their example, and in fulfillment of their role. It is easy and safe to follow the example of many people.

A fundamental desire is to avoid shame and hurt. Pieter retreats inside his armor because he is ashamed of his “feminine” activities. The Willemses are angry because they “must” fire Stephanie, and again, “most of all they were angry because some silly woman laughed,” (131). The laughing woman puts them to shame, forcing them to act. XXX.

Now that so many desires for safety have been identified, we may see how they manifest themselves, interlocking, in the destruction of Pieter. Pieter does two actions to

destroy himself: he commits his crime, and he fails to confess. He commits the crime because Nella, consistent with her country-girl chastity, does not satisfy him: he is “like a man who is robbed of a jewel, and goes seeking it amongst the dross and filth,” (209).

“When [Pieter] in his extremity asked for more of [Nella’s] love, she shrank from him, thinking it was *the coarseness of a man*,” (53; *emph. added*). Paton implies that her thought is the manifestation of a stereotype, rather than a valid criticism of Pieter, by writing that she thought it was “the coarseness of a man” rather than “Pieter’s coarseness.” Furthermore, it is exactly consistent with Nella’s role of the chaste country girl to shrink away from the coarse nature of a man. She inappropriately applies this stereotype to Pieter, a man who never makes a coarse joke, not even to himself (121); the son of Jakob, who, though he does make coarse jokes, only touches one woman in his life (120). She misunderstands her husband because of an inappropriate, sexist stereotype. Sophie explains it well: “[Nella] was already withdrawing [from Pieter], to some safer ground, to some world where she was safe and sure, not knowing that the world she left was safer and surer,” (209). The world that is safe and sure is the world of stereotyped roles and societal safety, but the safer and surer world is that which involves more love for her husband. It is safer and surer because the love protects him from his desires. Indeed, we see that, after she gives of herself to Pieter, he feels safe and sure and has the idea of confessing to Kappie (99). But she withdraws, not knowing this, or not wanting to know it. And so he goes out “seeking amongst the filth.”

The Willemses fire the girl Stephanie out of pride. A woman laughs at them for having Stephanie, and makes them feel foolish for it, so they put Stephanie out on the street, and

pay her “only for the days that she had worked, which is against the law; but it is a safe thing to do in Venterspan,” (131). And after she is put on the street, Stephanie goes to Pieter in his home to ask for money, and while she is there she tells him how to find her at night. So again, the Willemses’ desire to be safe from shame, and their safe action of not paying Stephanie, put her in the filth for Pieter to find.

More insight into Pieter’s reasons for breaking the law can be gained by examining the incident of the tree in the wind when he is a child, and comparing it to the time when he breaks the law. Sophie says of him in the tree that he is “drunk with the power to make us afraid,” (111). Similarly, the night that he breaks the law, he has “more than enough” (162) to drink, and is again “full of power” (163). By having Pieter be drunk and in power in both cases, Paton links the two.

When Sophie screams at him to come down from the tree, Pieter bends over backwards and lets go with both hands, “so that if he had fallen he would have fallen to death,” (111). When Sophie calls on him to tell her what is the matter, again he flouts her will and shames her, speaking hard, bitter words to her: “must you be taught again?” (229). What he is referring to is the power he has over her: after he comes down from the tree, he goes to Sophie and apologizes, and she hugs him, but he does not like the femininity of the kiss:

“Then he stiffened in my arms and looked away from me, as though there were something of which he was ashamed. . .

—What’s the matter, I said.

—I don’t like it, he said.

—What?

—To be kissed like that.

... And from that day he had the power over me.

So he goes back to his masculinity and has power over her. He is a man, and she is a disfigured old maid. She is worth nothing to society, why should he humble himself before her?

When Sophie asks him what is wrong at Jakob's birthday party, he "had opened the door, and ... I had forced myself into it, and ... he was forcing me out, so that he could shut it again," (110–111). The use of the figurative language of the door links this event to the symbol of his room: femininity lies behind the door of his room. Therefore, since she almost gets inside the door, and almost makes him confess, we find that he must see confession as feminine, and that this is why he cannot confess. To confess to Sophie would be to humble himself before the socially humblest one of all.

Likewise, he cannot confess to most of the others whom he contemplates because of their respect for him. He would be ashamed before those who respected him. That would be unacceptable. The only person to whom he actually starts to confess is the captain, who for the first time calls him by his name, and touches him.

"When the captain called him by his name and touched him, as some fathers touch their grown sons and as some do not, and because he was weary unto death and full of misery, therefore he was moved in some deep place within and something welled up within him that if not mastered could have burst out of his

throat and mouth, making him a girl or child.” (224)

Some fathers accept their sons’ femininity and touch them, while others, such as Jakob, do not. Pieter is already below the captain in rank—the captain is the only man above him in rank, and so the only one to whom a confession would not mean a humbling. By chance, the captain sends him away, thinking it is weariness that grips Pieter. And so Pieter has no one.

Sophie is given another chance to save Pieter, but is again stopped by fear of shame. She has a chance to tell Kappie her suspicions about Pieter: “It was in my heart to tell him the one piece that I thought I knew, but I was afraid. And . . . God forgive me, I pitied myself, and was ashamed,” (239). And so no one knows and acts on Pieter’s secret, and he is left to be destroyed.

Sergeant Steyn is made an enemy of the lieutenant by shame. When Pieter shouts at him in English, which Steyn does not like to use, and in public, and forces Steyn to answer in English, Steyn replies “with now not fear but murder in his eyes,” (152). And Pieter speaks these words because he is in the black mood, and he is in the black mood because of the letter he has from Nella, and that letter hurts him because she fulfills the role of the chaste country girl, pushing him away from her. Therefore, when Steyn is given the chance, he destroys Pieter, and all because of shame and sexism.

Furthermore, his weapon of destruction is racism. It is the desire of the Afrikaners to be safe from native touch and native blood that makes Pieter’s action so terrible in the public eye, and destroys the family.

Therefore, the sexism of South Africa causes Pieter to sin, and its racism and shame strike him down for that sin. *Too Late the Phalarope* is a condemnation of the values of South Africa. The values of South Africa are “good and true and twisted” (209): that a man should live with dignity, that a man should lead his household, that justice should be done against those who break the law. And this is the deep misery of South Africa.