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*Scars of a Colonial History: White Privilege, Race Relations and Anti-Apartheid Sensibilities
in Athol Fugard's "Master Harold"... and the Boys*

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Scars of a Colonial History: White Privilege, Race Relations and Anti-Apartheid Sensibilities in Athol Fugard's "*Master Harold*"... *and the Boys*

In giving a reading of Athol Fugard's celebrated play, "*Master Harold*"... *and the Boys* that interrogates its depiction of apartheid-era South African interracial social dynamics, one must be reminded of Fredric Jameson's famous opening exclamative in the preface to his book, *The Political Unconscious*: "Always historicize!" (9). The aphorism comes to mind partly because, in general terms, Jameson's pre-eminent left-wing ideas share points of contact with the twentieth century South African Communist Party. For instance, we can consider how the Communist Party found ways to use the European colonial narratives of racial inequality that were propagated by the governing National Party as political ammunition to combat capitalism in South Africa, and gain the support of anti-apartheid activists and Black nationalists. However, generalized left-wing connections notwithstanding, what proves most relevant for the purposes of this essay, and which is implicit in the oft-recalled phrase, is Jameson's insistence on developing an adequate historical context before giving way to literary, cultural, or political analysis. For Jameson, historicization is an essential component of any dedicated investigation of a cultural or aesthetic product. That said, this essay will therefore be involved with providing an overview of South African history as pertains to its colonial roots and its development of segregationist policies before shifting to the cultural and aesthetic product in question—Fugard's "*Master Harold*" ... *and the Boys*. Once a sufficient historical framework is established, I will investigate Fugard's portrayal of the impacts of Eurocentric ideology and politically enforced racism under the system of apartheid in twentieth-century South Africa, and demonstrate the play's functionality as a wide-range indictment of the social pathologies that arise out of an oppressor-oppressed social dynamic. An interpretation of Fugard's intent and personal experiences will also feature

to help draw conclusions on the playwright's desired audience impact. Before shifting focus onto Fugard, his play and its reception, then, I will begin the first portion of this essay with a historical discussion of the system of apartheid and its ties to the global system of European colonisation.

When trying to understand how in 1948 the South African state came to draft legislation that both legally enforced segregation and created a Social Darwinist racial hierarchy with whites at the top and 'coloured' and Black citizens at the bottom, one must look to the history of European colonisation in the territory. As Nancy Clark and William Worger identify in their book, *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, the roots of Afrikaner racism can be traced back to the Dutch colonisation of the Cape of Good Hope in 1652, where the colonists established an economy based on the use and exchange of slaves from East Africa and Southeast Asia (3). Even after the abolition of slavery in the 1830s, "racial discrimination continued in myriad forms as European settlement expanded, the British conquered African societies, and imperialists and settlers alike spoke of the 'civilising mission' of white rule and favoured, almost without exception, the segregation of black from white" (Clark and Worger 3). Furthermore, the historiography of the territory from colonisation into the early twentieth century (written primarily by European civil servants in the colonial administrations) reflects the typical imperialist sentiments of Eurocentrism, white supremacy, and tendencies toward a 'natural' social order which only permitted slight upward mobility for non-whites if they converted to Christianity (Clark and Worger 6-7). However, it was not until during and after the Second World War, with the growing imminence of the dissolution of Britain's control over the colonies, that Afrikaner politicians (principally those in the rising National Party), seeking support from an "Afrikaans-speaking... working-class electorate that felt exploited by British capitalists on one side and threatened by cheaper black workers on the other, engaged in a campaign of race-baiting" (Clark and Worger 4). Moreover, as Pam Christie and Colin Collins write in their essay, "Bantu Education: Apartheid Ideology or Labour Reproduction?," the National Party largely represented an Afrikaner population that were "not only isolationist but also racially prejudiced against the blacks" and viewed themselves as a "pure race which need[ed] to maintain its purity by racial segregation" (59). Apartheid, then, came as the government's solution to support the physical separation of black and white, and this separation was achieved by legislative policies and state action (Clark and Worger 4).

After officially implementing apartheid as state policy in 1948, the governing National Party sought to establish complete racial segregation in virtually all aspects of civil life by implementing pass laws (the Population Registration Act of 1950), whereby individuals were classified by their race and were required to carry identity cards (later called ‘reference books’) with them at all times. These books determined where an individual could live, work, travel, and even what buildings they could enter, based on their racial classification. It became known as the pass system and was “emblematic of the degree of control the government intended to exert over the African population and was a daily reminder... of the often petty but also determined repression under which they lived” (Clark and Worger 49). With this system of human monitoring in place, the National government could then use the pass system as a stepping stone towards the total control of every aspect of ‘native’ South African life. For example, the government could then more completely enforce other pieces of repressive legislation, such as The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (making marriages between whites and non-whites illegal), the Group Areas Act (which geographically divided the country based on race, allocating the most fertile and desirable land to whites, and forcing Black and non-white people into Shantytowns or infertile rural areas), and the Natives’ Land and Urban Areas Act (giving the government the power to remove anyone deemed ‘unfit’ to live in one area and forcibly relocate them elsewhere). All of these laws were systematically devised to secure power and privilege for the minority white population and to roadblock the physical freedoms of Black South Africans and other non-whites.

This discussion of the South African colonial history and the history of political tactics used by the Afrikaner National Party to segregate and subjugate Black and non-white South Africans is by no means exhaustive, and it represents a small portion of the full scope of oppression experienced by the Indigenous and non-white populations throughout the twentieth century. It is difficult to adequately situate Fugard and his play in the incredibly complex national history of South Africa, but my hope is that the discussion up to this point has at least provided a historical lens through which the ensuing exploration of “*Master Harold*” might be viewed. Born to Afrikaner and British parents in 1932, Fugard (whose official birth name is Harold) enjoyed the freedoms and privileges of whiteness in his formative years, much like Hally (the play’s central character) does in the play. It seems that, due to its largely autobiographical nature, to read

“*Master Harold*” is to read about confessional experiences from Fugard’s adolescence in Port Elizabeth. As John Jordan expresses in his autobiographical reading of the play, “Fugard’s *Notebooks: 1960-1977* made clear how extensively the story of Hally and Sam in the play draws upon real people and events,” as Fugard recalled a “string of memories” between himself and Sam Semela, the Basuto servant who worked for his mother (462). Such memories included: “the friendship between boy and man, the memory of their kite-flying, the rainy afternoon discussions of Eastern philosophy or Plato and Socrates, Sam’s proficiency as a ballroom dancer, and the shameful, culminating incident when, after a trivial quarrel between them, the thirteen-year-old Fugard spat in his friend’s face” (Jordan 462). The autobiographical components are thus self-evident; the main sequence of events in the play are derived almost exclusively from Fugard’s lived experience. The play should not, however, be understood as a mere recreation of real events, but instead as a retroactive reflection on a traumatic interaction that would shape Fugard’s understanding of race relations and white privilege in an oppressive South African nation. The shame he experienced because of his altercation with the real-life Sam would play an instrumental role in pushing him to use his writing as a medium for anti-apartheid activism.

In an essay originally published by the *New York Times* in 1964, Fugard discusses issues of racism and racial exclusion in African theatre, offering the current reader insight into his aims as an anti-apartheid writer, and as to why “*Master Harold*” was originally banned in South Africa. Fugard refers to the theatrical communities of numerous African countries as “cultural deserts” with mainly “whites-only” theatres that represent “a hangover from the old Colonial system, from a period when Africa was a continent of ‘white men and native boys’” (53). He goes on to describe the race politics surrounding South African theatre at the time as follows:

There are three main streams of theatre activity in South Africa. On one side there is Afrikaans-speaking and English-speaking theatre, both the indulgences of our white minority, operating in theatres reserved for whites only with occasional special performances for non-whites only. The third stream is a recent development, hardly more than ten years old, and reflects on the cultural front the fight at present being decided in South Africa. Put in its simplest terms, this has involved co-operation regardless of race, with mixed casts

playing to non-racial audiences. (Fugard 53)

Although Fugard actively ascribed to and sought to advance what he describes as the “third stream” of theatre activity, his public condemnation of apartheid (voiced mainly through his playwriting and support for boycotting whites-only theatres) led to his passport being revoked by the South African government and his subsequent sojourn in the United Kingdom before settling in the United States for several years (Williams 54-5). It was because of his conflict with the South African government that he published and produced numerous plays in Europe and the United States, including “*Master Harold*.”

Originally performed in 1982 at the Yale Repertory Theater in New Haven, Connecticut, Fugard directed the play, which featured Danny Glover in its cast (“Yale to Stage Premier”). Set in the 1950s, the play depicts the relationships—strained by the racial divide embedded in the social fabric of apartheid-era South Africa—between a teenage Afrikaaner boy, Hally (also called “Master Harold”), and two Black servants, Sam and Willie, who work for Hally’s family. The play opens with a dialogical exchange between Sam and Willie that divulges two key details: one, that they have both been practising for an upcoming provincial ballroom dance competition, and two, that Willie has been abusing his girlfriend and dancing partner, Hilda. This second point requires elaboration. Far from being a prejudiced attack on Willie’s character—perhaps aimed at implying some erroneous notion of the degeneracy or moral shortcomings of the Black subject—Fugard is intimately aware of the widespread appropriation of epistemic violence that subjugated groups often turn to after suffering long periods of social injustice and oppression. Just as Frantz Fanon describes how the “colonized subject will first train his aggressiveness sedimented in his muscles against his own people,” Fugard similarly demonstrates this issue of epistemic violence through Willie’s domestic abuse of Hilda. Unable to reciprocate the racial violence he experiences from his white oppressors Willie instead redirects his anger towards Hilda and reveals that he beats her in a disturbing diatribe:

WILLIE. ... She’s fucking around all the time I turn my back. Hilda Samuels is a bitch! ...

You listening?

SAM. Ja.

WILLIE. So what you say? ...

SAM. When did you last give her a hiding?

WILLIE. (Reluctantly) Sunday night... (He knows what's coming)...

SAM. Hiding on Sunday night, then Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday she doesn't come to practice... and you're asking me why? ... You hit her too much. (Fugard 6-7)

The audience is therefore not prejudiced into identifying or sympathising with the play's Black characters simply because they find themselves in positions that make them victims of racial injustice. Instead, Fugard tries to convey to the audience the extent to which colonial and racially segregated societies produce social pathologies for both the oppressor and the oppressed, and that, unable to release frustrations on their oppressors, the oppressed will often seek to fill the role of the oppressor in their personal relationships, thereby perpetuating cycles of colonial violence.

Shortly after this conversation takes place, Hally is introduced and joins the scene in a mood of friendship. It is made apparent that he and Sam have a close relationship, evidenced by the different ways which Sam and Willie refer to Hally, where Willie always uses the term "Master" and Sam uses the more personal "Hally." Furthermore, Hally and Sam's closeness is revealed in a lengthy conversation between the two that all but excludes Willie and enters into what appears to be very familiar philosophical territory for the pair. It is during this conversation that Hally's inherent prejudice, ignorance, and moral deficiencies begin to reveal themselves. For instance, after Sam describes an incident where a magistrate sentenced him to be beaten with a cane, Hally contends that "progress" is the answer to eliminating those kinds of barbarous punishments (Fugard 15). However, he is never able to specify what he means by "progress," nor is he able to connect his suggestions toward social reform with the obvious social inequalities of the contemporaneous South African situation. As their discussion surrounding social reform continues, Sam invokes Napoleon as a model figure, referring to him as a great man who "regarded all people as equal before the law" (Fugard 18), thereby offering Hally an opportunity to sympathise with what is obviously Sam's imperative of relating the conversation to his position of social and racial disadvantage. However, once again, Hally fails to make the connection and rejects Sam's claim, saying, "Don't confuse historical significance with greatness," before ironically conceding, "maybe I'm being a bit prejudiced" (Fugard 18). In a resounding fashion, Hally solidifies himself in a position of white ignorance in his response to Sam's

proclamation of Abraham Lincoln as his selected “man of magnitude” (Fugard 20). Sam’s invocation of Lincoln is extremely suggestive. Perhaps he is hoping for Hally to embrace some of the philosophies of the white emancipator, to sympathise with the subjugated Black population and to strive to work with them in their emancipatory struggle and thereby liberate not only those oppressed by racial injustice, but also himself from the bondage of bigotry and ignorance. To this, Hally ignorantly retorts; “Don’t get sentimental, Sam. You’ve never been a slave, you know. And anyway we freed your ancestors here in South Africa long before the Americans” (Fugard 20). Hally’s unsympathetic disposition towards the sufferings of his Black counterparts in these exchanges foreshadows the inevitable explosive result at the end of the play—he proves himself either unwilling or incapable of recognizing the injustice of racial oppression that occurs in South Africa and that he himself contributes to by perpetuating inequalities. His callousness poignantly juxtaposes the hope that Sam holds for Hally’s own moral emancipation, and indeed, too, for those white South Africans exploiting their system of racial inequality.

Before turning to the culminating event itself, it is important to understand the various components preceding the climax that eventually enable Hally’s actualization of racial violence. Throughout the play, Hally exhibits behaviours that one would expect to see in someone who has appropriated the bigoted posture of his white supremacist forebears. For instance, he slights Sam with microaggressions and condescension repeatedly, as when he imperiously states: “After your last contribution I’m beginning to doubt whether anything in the way of an intellectual agreement is possible between the two of us” (Fugard 22). Or when he imagines how he will justify writing about their ballroom dancing competition to his Afrikaner teacher: “I’ll point out to him that in strict anthropological terms the culture of a primitive black society includes its dancing and singing... the release of primitive emotions through movement” (Fugard 43). These microaggressions exhibit the extent to which Hally has been tainted by a prejudiced epistemological system, that is, the greater social network of apartheid. Certainly, the most prominent figure in shaping Hally’s Eurocentric mentality, as alluded to in the play, is his father. Hally’s nebulous relationship with his father is mainly revealed throughout the course of the play in one-sided phone conversations between Hally and his mother, wherein he tries desperately to keep his bedridden father at the hospital and away from home. It is ultimately revealed that his father is an alcoholic who steals money from the family to finance

his excessive drinking habits, leaving Hally and his mother tightly strapped. Hally's troubled relationship with his father notwithstanding, he nevertheless perpetuates his father's racist behaviour when attempting to emotionally wound Sam as he vents his rage:

HALLY. ... You see, you mustn't get the wrong idea about me and my Dad, Sam. We also have our good times together. Some bloody good laughs. He's got a marvelous sense of humor. Want to know what our favorite joke is? He gives out a big groan, you see, and says: "It's not fair, is it, Hally?" Then I have to ask: "What, chum?" And then he says: "A nigger's arse" ... and we both have a good laugh. (*The men stare at him with disbelief*). (Fugard 55)

The climax of the scene is reached when, shortly after his hideous joke, Hally spits in Sam's face. Sam's resounding lament for Hally reveals the dangers of perpetuating intergenerational racism, one of the play's most enduring messages:

SAM. ... Ja, well, you've done it... Master Harold. Yes, I'll start calling you that from now on. It won't be difficult anymore. You've hurt yourself, Master Harold. I saw it coming. I warned you, but you wouldn't listen. You've just hurt yourself bad. And you're a coward, Master Harold. The face you should be spitting in is your father's... but you used mine, because you think you're safe inside your fair skin. (Fugard 56)

Sam's monologue suggests that, because Hally cannot take his anger out on his own father, he chooses to redirect it onto Sam and continue his ancestors' legacy of racial hatred. However, as both the conclusion of the play and Fugard's adult life of anti-apartheid activism suggest (recall that this play is largely autobiographical), hope for a better future is still available if those in positions of power can recognize their own contributions to exploitative systems and instead (like Fugard himself) work towards their dismantling.

After the fallout from Hally's emotional outburst, Sam offers that they "try again... hope for better weather tomorrow" and learn from their mistakes (Fugard 59). In this way, with his lived experience serving as an authentic example, Fugard attempts to leave his audience with an impression that epistemic prejudice and violence can be overcome with compassion and a willingness to learn. However, the multifarious interpersonal repercussions that colonially rooted systems of racial oppression inflict on their subjects

and their social relations, as revealed in the characters' dialogue, indicates the complexity of the problems at hand. While Fugard's play is designed to unequivocally reveal the ugliness of white racism while simultaneously offering hope for more progressive South African race relations, such progress (to use Hally's word) is unlikely to materialize without surpassing some form of a culminating threshold. Hally's outburst towards Sam, when looked at in these terms, might be understood as a representation of the breaking point that is needed to achieve Fugard's utopian hope for the South African state. In some respects, "*Master Harold*" might be read as a plea for others in positions of racial privilege to learn from their mistakes and strive for ideological advancement before violent revolution becomes necessary—especially for those who were living contemporaneously in South Africa. Finally, the intergenerational emphasis in Fugard's play lends perhaps one last interpretive dimension. Hally's youth, and thus his potential for growth and change when compared to his father, may be viewed as Fugard's challenge for the nation's youth to rise to their responsibility as inheritors of their forebears' mistakes and make choices that favour Hally's "progress." His play therefore represents an ambitious but hopeful call to younger generations to work for a better collective future. That said, for a twenty-first century audience or readership, the analysis offered here has ideally satisfied Jameson's call for historicization in literary scholarship and provided a more holistic interpretive approach to Fugard's text. This discussion will have preferably contributed more insight to the ways in which intergenerational discursive, racial, and physical violence become self-perpetuating in colonial oppressor-oppressed social systems, and further demonstrated the influential power of literature as a mode of social criticism and discourse.

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