

## **The Kite in 'Master Harold'...and the Boys: Vision for the Future and Freedom or Reality of their Present and Oppression?**

*'Master Harold' ...and the Boys ('Master Harold')*, has often been acknowledged as the most autobiographical of Fugard's works (Jordan 461). The publication of Fugard's *Notebooks: 1960-1977* make clear how the play extensively draws upon the real experiences of the writer (known in his childhood as Hally) as he grew up in a society defined by the oppression of apartheid (Fugard, *Notebooks 1960/1977*). Throughout the play the dialogue details the real and 'defining' experiences of the writer (Fugard, 'Defining Moments'), most notably perhaps in the dramatic climax of the play when Hally, 'loaded with the prejudices and the bigotries' that characterised South Africa in this period (Fugard, 'Defining Moments'), spits in the face of his family's black employee and his one true childhood friend (Walder 22). The equally important moment in the play comes when Sam creates a kite for Hally to 'look up' at and 'be proud of' (Fugard, *'Master Harold'...and the boys* p. 47), after the young boy had been shamed and upset by the drunken behaviour of his disabled father. And this too is based on autobiographical fact. It is a moment that epitomises Sam's role as surrogate father to this young white boy (Walder 123) and their close interracial bond. However, I would agree with John O. Jordan's reading of *'Master Harold'*, when he describes it as a play that is not purely focused on personal matters (462). In previous academic writing, a focus on the personal and confessional aspects of *'Master Harold'* has often led to a 'distorted understanding of its political significance' (Jordan 462). Whilst the play clearly does use factual events to create the narrative, this should not obscure from the great political significance of the 'explicit, metaphoric lessons' (Walder 110) identifiable in the text. Jordan concentrates on Sam and Willie's penchant for ballroom dancing as the main metaphorical manifestation of this idea

(461-472), a focus typical of many critical readings of the play. The dancing does allow the audience to understand Fugard's own 'vision of a better world' (Fugard, 'Defining Moments') where 'accidents don't happen' (p. 36), however, I will argue that the kite flying episode or section is equally important in providing insight into Fugard's own ideological ideals. I will also examine the scene's importance as a dramatic tool that explores the bigotries and complexities of the relationship between Sam and Hally, and the way that the society they live in acts as the ultimate influence on their connection. Fugard's inclusion and description of the kite's creation and flight certainly has purpose beyond that of an autobiographical account.

The kite-flying scene captures the liberal and didactic nature of the play and its hopeful message of racial cohesion and black freedom from oppression. As Albert Wertheim states, the kite's flight literally makes Hally, and therefore the audience too, momentarily look up and away from the unpleasant South African present to the soaring possibilities of the future (137). Certainly, the kite is in many ways a clear metaphor for freedom from oppression, as the kite flies high above the chaotic and discriminatory society that Sam and Hally inhabit. Contrary to Hally's prejudiced expectations ('what the hell does a black man know about flying a kite?' (p. 23)) Sam's creation has the ability to quite literally transcend and rise above the unjust world. Despite being made out of 'tomato-box wood', 'brown paper', and Hally's mother's 'old stockings', the kite soars (p. 24). Fugard appears to suggest to his audience that if Sam's unassuming creation, made from trash and the discarded commodities of his oppressor, can fly, then so too can the subjugated black population of South Africa despite the limitations of their prejudiced society.

The story of the kite also serves to highlight the capacity of black and white people to work together in order to enable this liberation. At the start of the episode, Sam creates the kite whilst Hally just watches. Alternatively, when they go out onto the hill it is Hally who

gets it airborne whilst Sam observes; ‘you went a little distance from me down the hill’ (p. 23). The two events therefore reflect one another, with each character performing a central and then secondary role in different parts of the kite’s success. There is a sense of equilibrium between the characters, suggesting team work and cohesion. This unity is reflected in the structure of the passage. The dialogue alternates between both Sam and Hally as they tell the story together. For example:

HALLY: You came up and joined me. You were laughing.

SAM: So were you. And shouting, ‘It work Sam! We’ve done it!’

HALLY: And we had! I was so proud of us! (p. 24)

The two characters describe each other’s emotions rather than their own, using the personal pronoun ‘you’. This furthers the idea that in this moment they are unified and enjoying their success together. The use of ‘we’ twice and Hally’s exclamation ‘I was so proud of us’ also furthers the idea that the task was a joint effort. Mark Cummings describes the kite flying scene as an ‘image of community’ (71), which highlights the importance of this moment in showing that the characters are not just a young white master and a black servant, but equals who created a ‘miracle’ (p. 23) together. When the kite flies ‘free’ (p. 24) the audience can believe that with the collective effort of both Afrikaners and native South Africans, equality in this country is possible.

However, when examining ‘*Master Harold*’ as a whole, I would offer an alternative interpretation of the power dynamic between these characters in the kite flying scene; one that reveals Fugard’s underlying pessimism (Wertheim 150) and the systems of control operating between black and white people in the wider context of apartheid South Africa. Sam creates the kite from scratch. It is his laborious physical work and skill that results in such fun for Hally. This can be read as yet another instance of a black man’s work being

appropriated for a white man's pleasure. The play begins with the image of Willie 'on his knees, mopping down the floor' (p. 3). Even before Hally's entry, the symbolic 'single chair' which 'stands apart' (p. 3) in the room represents his powerful and privileged position. From the very start therefore, Willie is quite literally shown to be lower than Hally. The idea of Sam and Willie performing physical work continues throughout the play; they are constantly 'cleaning, polishing, stacking chairs, waiting on Hally, helping him with his homework, answering the telephone, tidying up, and so on' (Jordan 465). Sam arguably appears 'more educated than Willie' (Jordan 465) and does not work quite so much, preferring to engage with Hally in intellectual discussion and nostalgic reminiscing instead. Nevertheless, he is still offering his services for the purpose of Hally's personal education and success, and this continues as he constructs the kite. Sam works hard to make the kite. He is 'on the floor' (p. 22) in the same way Willie is depicted at the start, which acts as a literal manifestation of his subordinate position. It also highlights that within their tiny room there is no proper furniture. Also, in the same way that Willie sings as he scrubs the floor (p. 3), Sam whistles whilst he creates the kite (p. 23). The image of a black man making music as he performs manual labour is uneasily reminiscent of typical slavery imagery, which would perhaps have been particularly poignant to the original American audience. The final 'twist' (p. 25) at the end of the kite flying tale is that Sam cannot continue to enjoy the moment as he can't sit on the 'Whites Only' bench, and also because there was most likely some truth in his assertion that he has 'work to do' (p. 24). Through the tragic end to the tale, Fugard epitomises the problem with viewing the scene as purely an example of black and white people working together. Sam put in the hard work, but it is Hally who enjoys the result due to the unjust laws of their country. This injustice was mirrored in many areas of society during apartheid. For example, in this period half of South Africa's police force was non-white (Adelman 49); but the hard

work of these men resulted in maintaining an oppressive system that only benefitted white people.

This unjust power dynamic can also be considered in terms of space. It is in the servant's quarters at the Old Jubilee boarding house that the kite is created (p. 19). It is a private space, and perhaps one of the only places where Sam and Willie can be truly free. They have power and choice there; for example, the audience hear about Sam's enjoyable sexual exploits with Cynthia in this room (p.20). They also have posters of their heroes on the walls (p. 21). They can express their identity and also exert autonomy over the space, however small and shabby it may be. When Hally enters on the day of their kite flying, Fugard exhibits clearly the authority that Sam has in the room — making clear that it is a 'black space'. Sam infuriates Hally, 'deliberately being slow and not answering his questions' (p. 23). Sam exerts his control by withholding information that Hally desperately wants, even if he does so jovially. Moreover, from the moment Hally describes entering the room he repeatedly uses the pronoun 'you'. In this space it is about Sam and not himself. For example: 'you on the floor', 'you had two thin pieces of wood and you were smoothing them down', 'I asked you what you were doing', 'you just said 'wait and see'', 'you teased me', 'you tied them together', 'I realised what you were doing', 'you said yes' (p. 22-23). However, as soon as they exit the room and go out into the public 1950s South African landscape, their roles begin to change. Hally argues back when Sam tells him to 'hold the string and run with it' (p. 23). And whilst Sam's creation is a success outside his little room, it is Hally who gets it airborne and Hally who is left to watch the kite. On the surface Sam is the master, the creator and the one who can make it 'dive down to the ground and... swoop up again' (p. 24), but ultimately it is Hally who ends up with the kite and Sam who must retreat back to the private space of the servant quarters, unable to stay with Hally on the 'Whites Only' bench. It is significant that Hally later admits it is in inside the room, where Sam actually has some

autonomy, that 'life felt the right size' (p. 26). Hally, without realising it, acknowledges that he has a greater feeling of ease and happiness in a space where the balance of power mirrors that of a traditional father and son relationship. A power dynamic where skill and age are more important than colour of skin. In many ancient traditions, especially in Asian culture, control over a kite represents control over the 'air or spirit' (Singer 121). Hally's ultimate control of the kite ties into this idea. Through this image Fugard shows that Hally, as a white boy, has control over the spirit of South Africa. The white subjugation of the black majority has created a violent society filled with hatred. Because Hally is white he has ultimate control, and so inevitably the work of this black man is, in the end, appropriated by Hally for his pleasure alone.

However, although the creation of the kite displays an unbalanced relationship between Sam and Hally, the kite's actual ascent is simple, easy and unhindered. In this way, the kite flying provides insight into Fugard's own ideal of not just freedom from oppression in South Africa, but also from violence. In much of Fugard's work a 'classically liberal squeamishness' about 'armed struggle' (Jordan 468) can be identified. In *The Island* for example, neither protagonist has been imprisoned for a violent act; John belonged to a banned organization (Fugard, *The Island* 62) whilst Winston was imprisoned for burning his passbook in front of police (Fugard, *The Island* 63). Alternatively, the unseen Hodoshe is presented as a brutal symbol of apartheid and racism, and concurrently is the only one in the play to use physical violence. Fugard thus equates violence with brutalist discrimination and inhumanity. John and Winston instead manifest their anger and political fervour towards apartheid through the transformative power of theatre and not aggressive action. This reflects Fugard's own belief about the important 'role of theatre in an oppressive society' to promote change (Fugard 'Defining Moments'), as opposed to violence and aggression. For example, his role as a founding member of the Serpent Players, a group constantly under the

surveillance of Special Branch forces of the police (Pressley), emphasises his commitment to theatre as an effective form of protest. The theatrical group, based in the impoverished New Brighton township, gave these black actors a voice they never had before, and a sense of empowerment that was arguably far deeper than any power violence could bring (Fugard 'Defining Moments'). Other plays appear to condemn violence too, for example *Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act* highlights the beauty and vulnerability of the human body. *Master Harold*, as one of Fugard's later works, continues to promote the idea of a world where there are no 'collisions' (p. 36). The flawlessness of the dancing at the Centenary Hall in New Brighton obviously epitomises Fugard's ideal of a South Africa free from hostility. However, the kite also promotes a pacifist message. The 'bumps' (p. 36) of life that, according to Sam, so often result in people getting 'hurt' (p. 37), are impossible out in the open sky on top of a hill. There is nothing to bump into, and the kite's ease of ascension plays into Fugard's ideal of peaceful flight and fight on the road to equality. The liberty from collision that the kite enjoys in the open sky ties into the idea of this play as a didactic presentation of Fugard's ideas about peaceful protest. The kite launches into the sky without trouble:

HALLY: I was running, waiting for it to crash to the ground but instead suddenly there was something alive behind me at the end of the string, tugging at it as if it wanted to be free. I looked back... [shakes his head] ...I still can't believe my eyes. It was flying! (p. 24).

No harsh or aggressive language is used to describe the kite's ascent. The sibilant alliteration of 'suddenly', 'something' and 'string' gives the sentence a smooth and continuous sound. The long sentence structure, in addition to the ellipsis that Fugard employs, gives the monologue a continuity that captures the ease of the kite's flight. The idea black people rising to freedom without violence would have been deeply poignant to the audience watching this

play when it premiered in 1982. The first performance took place many miles away from South Africa, in Connecticut, but by the 1980s an awareness and condemnation of the violence in South Africa was identifiable globally (Clymer). As stated in an article in 1985, ‘apartheid causes and continues to cause violence’ (Okhamafe 20). In this period, violence was being used both as a method of law enforcement by the oppressive authorities, as well as a method of protest by groups such as the *Umkhonto we Sizwe*. In the words of the contemporary American President Ronald Reagan, there was ‘violence between blacks...as well as from the law enforcement against riotous behaviour’ (Okhamafe 21). Recent horror and bloodshed in the years before the premier of *Master Harold* would have made the image of a peaceful rise to freedom even more striking. For example: the Soweto uprising of 1976, where the number of deaths has been estimated at as many as seven hundred (Rotberg 87); the brutal murder of Steven Biko at the hands of the South African police in 1977 (Adelman 48); the many terrorist attacks carried out by *Umkhonto we Sizwe* in the 1980s (Truth and Reconciliation Report South Africa); a bomb explosion at the African National Congress headquarters in London during the same month that *Master Harold* premiered (Truth and Reconciliation Report South Africa 157). Such recent and horrific violence must have been in the minds of the audience as they heard the glorious description of a kite soaring, unobstructed, into open air. Like Hally, the audience would perhaps have been waiting for the kite to crash to the ground and become another ‘fiasco’ (p. 23). But instead it soars without collision.

However, an alternative reading can be offered when we consider that whilst written in 1982, the play is set in 1950. After the horror of the 1960 Sharpeville massacre, where sixty-nine people were killed by police as they peacefully protested, Mandela and many other influential critics of apartheid became convinced that a system which violently imposes itself on others cannot be changed peacefully (Okhamafe 20). Prior to this, peaceful protest was

seen as the ideal by many. In 1947, three years before *Master Harold* takes place, Gandhi's policy of passive resistance enabled him to realize his dream of an independent India (Wertheim 149). This peaceful resistance was, in the early years of apartheid, the ideal method of liberation in South Africa as well. The kite's ascension into the open air without struggle reflects this early, naive hope for a peaceful fight for equality in South Africa. Because *Master Harold* was written thirty-two years after it is set, Fugard is able to reflect on the development of the anti-apartheid movement over several decades with retrospection. The play as a whole can be seen to reflect the struggle for freedom that ensued over an extended period. At the start of the play, Fugard's characters launch their kite with ease. The kite flies because of their team work, and there is no difficulty or conflict with the elements. But by the end of the play this activity seems like nothing more than a childish pastime. It is only a naive dream. Their reminiscing of the moment has a dreamlike quality; the bright day on top of the hill contrasts to the dull interior of the tea shop, with its 'stale cakes' and disordered price list written by an 'untrained hand' (p. 3). When the reminiscing ends, the characters return to the 'wet and windy' (p. 3) reality of the present. There would be no easy way to launch the kite now. This reflects the fact that by the 1980s, the idea of peaceful protest as an effective method with which to oppose apartheid seemed like a naive and innocent ideal. It was an ideal that by the 1980s seemed as impossible as flying a kite in a storm.

In conclusion, the kite flying episode provides a fascinating insight into the systems of both oppression and protest operating in apartheid South Africa. Fugard's own ideas about violence, brotherhood and injustice shine through this evocative and mesmerising moment in the play, presenting the audience with a dilemma as to whether *Master Harold* is mainly hopeful or pessimistic. Today, South Africa is still a place where corruption is 'deep-rooted' (Hain) and fifty people are murdered every day (England). In Fugard's own words, 'the new

South Africa, tragically, needs the vigilance of writers every bit as much as the old one did' (Fugard, 'Defining Moments'). In a society where rain still prevents flight, South Africa needs the dream of a kite flying free just as much as it did in both 1950 and 1982. Fugard presents original and contemporary audiences with a narrative that forces us to question how far South Africa has come, but how far it still has to go.

### **Works Cited**

- Adelman, Kenneth L. "Is There Any Hope Left in South Africa?" *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 13, no.1. Communication and Change in SubSaharan (1982): 45-58. Web.
- Clymer, Adam. "Poll in south africa shows a rise in whites' distaste for apartheid." *The New York Times*, 3 August 1986. Web.
- Cummings, Mark. "Reclaiming the Canon: A World without Collisions: "Master Harold"... and the Boys" in the Classroom." *The English Journal*, vol. 76, no. 6. (1989): 71-73. Web.
- England, Charlotte. "South Africa's murder rate climbs 4.9 per cent to 51 people killed every day." *Independent*, 3 September 2016. Web.  
<<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/south-africa-murder-rate-51-killed-every-day-rise-49-per-cent-a7224176.html>>.
- Athol, Fugard. 'Defining Moments.' The Weidenfeld-Hoffmann Trust, 10 November 2010, University of Oxford. Lecture. Web.  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iflUJVUWvY8>>
- Fugard, Athol. "Master Harold'...and the boys." *Port Elizabeth Plays*. Ed. Dennis Walder. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 1-49. Print.
- Fugard, Athol. *Notebooks 1960/1977*. Ed. Mary Benson. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1983. Print.
- Fugard, Athol. "The Island." Fugard, Athol. *Statements*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974. 45-78. Print.
- Hain, Peter. "South Africa today: betraying or upholding Mandela's values?" *NewStatesman*, 4 February 2016. Web. <<https://www.newstatesman.com/world/2016/02/south-africa-today-betraying-or-upholding-mandelas-values>>.

- Jordan, John O. "Life in the Theatre: Autobiography, Politics, and Romance in 'Master Harold'... and the Boys." *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 39, no. 4. (1993): 461-472. Web.
- Okhamafe, Imafedia E. "South Africa: A Story in Black and White." *The Black Scholar*, vol.16, no. 6. U.S. Anti-Apartheid Upsurge (1985): 18-23. Web.
- Pressley, Nelson. "The Men Who Transport Fugard's 'Island'." *The Washington Post*, 4 November 2001. Web.
- Rotberg, Robert L. *Suffer the Future, Policy Choices in Southern Africa*. London: Harvard University Press, 1980. Print.
- Singer, Bayla. "Gliders, Parachutes and Kites." Singer, Bayla. *Like Sex with Gods: An Unorthodox History of Flying*. Vol. 3. United States: Texas A&M University Press, 2003. 117-145. Print.
- Truth and Reconciliation Report South Africa*. Cape Town: Truth and Reconciliation Comission, 1998. Web.
- Walder, Dennis. *Athol Fugard*. London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1984. Print.
- Wertheim, Albert. *The Dramatic Art of Athol Fugard*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. Print.