“No Lessons Learnt”: Reading the Texts of Fugard’s *A Lesson from Aloes* and *Master Harold. . . and the Boys.*

Sheila Roberts

The action of *A Lesson from Aloes* takes place in the backyard and bedroom of a lower middle-class house named “Xanadu” where, through the afternoon and evening, Piet and Gladys Bezuidenhout prepare to receive friends (a Coloured family who are emigrating) for a farewell dinner. *Master Harold. . . and the boys* presents us with an ill-stocked tea-room in which, during a rainy afternoon, the son of the white owners and two black male servants interact and come into conflict. From both plays the reader derives a sense of the peculiar isolation of the characters. In *Master Harold* no customers turn up at the tea-room; and in *Aloes*, Gladys Bezuidenhout says to her husband Piet:

> I won’t have any trouble finding something to write in my diary tonight.  
> “At last! Other people! Just when I was beginning to feel as if Peter and I were the last two left in the world. Steven and his family came to supper.”

(p. 11)

As things turn out, the family do not come to supper: only Steven turns up, arriving very late and evidently reluctantly. But before the small and disappointing supper party takes place, Gladys relates to Piet how she almost told a representative from an evangelising group that the end of the world had indeed already happened, adding:

> If I haven’t got the radio on or a car isn’t passing in the street, it’s hard sometimes to believe there is a world out there full of people. Just you and me. That’s all that’s left. The streets are empty and I imagine you wandering around looking for another survivor . . .

(p. 20)

The worlds outside the scenes of these plays seem to the reader to have become deserted. In fact, in the National Theatre production of *Aloes* in London in 1980, the way Piet and Gladys sat, almost side-by-side, squarely in front of the audience conveyed a Beckettian mood of reduction and desolation.
The effect in these plays of the characters' isolation in an empty world is also one of eerie political stasis or, perhaps more accurately, one of political obsolescence: the reader can visualize looking at the lit area on stage as through a time-tunnel. The date of *Master Harold* is set in 1950 and that of *Aloes* in 1963, but neither play projects in even the faintest ways towards a future that has become both past and present for the author and his audience. Before the curtain falls in *Aloes*, Gladys Bezuidenhout has decided to return to the mental institution where she has in the recent past received treatment; Steve the visitor has gone, and Piet the Afrikaner is left holding an unidentified aloe plant. At the end of *Master Harold* the two black male servants are seen practising, in the deserted "whites only" tea-room, a foxtrot to the jukebox music of "Little boy (sic) you've had a busy day." Even if we see these plays as forming two parts of a whole that does reflect on the current South African situation, that is, Piet, the liberal Afrikaner is waiting for change; Steve, the harassed political activist has to leave; Gladys, the alienated Englishwoman, retreats into a disturbed inner life as, to a certain extent, does Master Harold; while the black men dance in harmony — even so, a great deal of what South Africans know about their own situation is excluded, and a South African reader or audience with any political sophistication must feel that participation in these dramas can only be as a kind of saddened archivist.

However, to turn away from what the plays don’t do to what they do: both deal, as almost all Fugard’s work has done, with failed human relationships, and in both the failure has occurred between blacks and whites who, up to the point of crisis, have enjoyed friendships of intense intimacy. In *Aloes*, the destruction of the comradeship between Steve and Piet has come about because of Steve’s suspicion that Piet was the one who turned traitor to their group of political activists, causing Steve’s arrest and banning and his realization that he could only continue to survive out of South Africa. In *Master Harold*, Hallie the white boy does in fact betray the complex parent-child relationship that was established years ago between him and Sam, his parents’ black servant. And there is, of course, Gladys’s curious sense of betrayal, which I shall touch on later.

In both plays questions of identity and the names that go with identities are explored, though this aspect is not as dominant in *Master Harold* as it is in *Aloes*. In *Aloes*, the word "name" occurs 23 times and names themselves are used with sharp significance at least a dozen times. Just as names may reflect identities (or derive a distinctive resonance from the personalities to which they are attached) so may places where people live: how and where one lives is, in certain cases, a measure of who one is. Ironically, the
disunited Piet and Gladys live in a house named "Xanadu" — happiness! Piet Bezuidenhout has tried to live in his Eastern Cape world under various conditions: he has been a farmer, a busdriver, and involved in politics. In the two areas where his whole personality was engaged, in farming and in politics, he has undergone "drought" or failure. Yet, reduced to uselessness and friendlessness, to naming aloes and storing them in jam tins in his backyard, he asserts:

For better or for worse I will remain positively identified as Petrus Jacobus Bezuidenhout; Species, Afrikaner; Habitat, Algoa Park, Port Elizabeth, in this year of our Lord, 1963 ... and accept the consequences. (p. 5)

That he should use the marriage-vow terms "for better or for worse" reflects adversely, even if Piet is not totally conscious of it, on Gladys's inability to withstand the "worse". What Piet is determined to do is wait out this "drought", not move along as he did when previously an actual drought drove him off his farm where the only remaining living thing was a huge flowering aloe. Now, in his "sitzkrieg", he examines aloes minutely, giving the reader the sense (in spite of his words that he is doing it for pleasure) that he hopes to discover what intangible quality it is in aloes that allows them to survive. The reader's immediate impulse is to see the aloes as emblematic of Piet (and perhaps of the Afrikaner in general), but such an association is only partially laudatory to Piet. The aloes he cultivates are all confined in tins. Certainly, Piet faces his life of increasing isolation with courage and gentleness and, more importantly, with a stable sense of self and a consequent tolerance of the weakness of others. Yet there is in him an inflexibility too, a stubborn resolution to remain in his own political and social "jam tin". And because the author intimates nothing of the nature of Piet's future, except that his wife will once again enter a mental institution, the reader can foresee no "consequences" arising out of Piet's resistance to moving — only more of the same aloe-planting and documenting activity. What is also remarkable is the reader's inability to respond emotionally to Gladys Bezuidenhout's announcement that she wants to return to the mental institution. But why should the reader respond when nothing in the play suggests that Piet and Gladys have ever been truly "married" — there is a polite sexlessness between them, a flatness that does not even approach a brother-and-sister relationship? They do not even dress and undress in front of each other.

Hallie, the seventeen-year-old boy in Master Harold, is Piet's antithesis.
While Piet, a middle-aged Afrikaner, has painstakingly learnt some English poetry and some favourite lines from Shakespeare's plays, Hallie, a precocious yet callow boy, refers to his English examination as "a piece of cake. Eighty percent without even trying" (p. 25) and suggests that they should bring Shakespeare's language up-to-date (p. 29). Whereas Piet, remarking on Juliet's speech about Romeo's name ('Then deny thy father and refuse thy name') says, "Hell! I don't know about those Italians, but that's a hard one for an Afrikaner" (p. 5), Hallie denies both his father and his surrogate father, and insults them both viciously. Then, with intentional cruelty, he insists that Sam, the surrogate, call him not "Hallie", the affectionate childish nickname Sam has for him, but "Master Harold". And Sam must begin to remember his "place" as a black servant (p. 85).

Hallie, unlike Piet, has no sense of a home, a place to which he undeniably belongs. At one point in the play he reminisces about the Jubilee Boarding House his parents managed when he was a small boy, but his most vivid memories are about spending time with Sam and Willie (the other manservant) in Sam's room. Now he spends time in the tea-room which his mother owns, lording it over Sam and Willie, but also entertaining them and being entertained by them in his more light-hearted moments. The topic which they discuss on this rainy day, and which begins to be the subject of Hallie's school essay, is the importance of competitive ballroom dancing, a blatant paradigm in the play of an ideal state of human cooperation and avoidance of "collision". But at the end of the afternoon, when it is time for Hallie to go home, he says to Willie and Sam:

Hurry up now and finish your work. I want to lock up and get out of here . . . And then go where? Home-sweet-fucking-home. Jesus I hate that word. (p. 79)

Hallie is too young and too self-absorbed to understand what is leading him to a moment of collision with Sam and then to bitter rejection of the black man who has been more of a father to him than his own father (and even at times been the "son" to Hallie playing parent). Hallie has been deeply repelled by his own crippled, drunken father, a man who steals money from the till and from Hallie's mother's purse to buy drink. When he hears, during the course of the afternoon, that his father will be coming home from hospital, he becomes angry at the imposition on him of responsibility towards a man who shames him, so he takes out his anger in mockery and derision of his father in front of the black workers. When Sam reproaches him, saying "Your father is your father even if he is a . . .
cripple man” (p. 81), he turns on Sam in fury. Fugard then, with expert dramatic ability, arranges for Hallie and Sam to change positions. Sam is insulted when Hallie points out that the “cripple” man is Sam’s boss, adding, “He’s a whiteman and that’s good enough for you” (p. 84). Hallie, of course, is clinging to his father’s whiteness in an effort to regain superiority for himself and his father over the black man, knowing full well that when Sam said “cripple” he was tactfully not saying “drunken”. What increases Hallie’s sensitivity about his father is the practice Sam and Willie have in ballroom dancing: Hallie’s father has to carry crutches.

Determined to humiliate Sam, Hallie relates to him a crude joke he enjoys with his father (or so he says) about black men’s backsides. Sam, now playing the same game, drops his trousers and shows Hallie his own black buttocks. At that Hallie spits in Sam’s face. The way Sam has now distanced himself from being a father to Hallie is emphasized when he says (now calling Hallie “Master Harold”) “The face you should be spitting in is your father’s” (p. 89).

*Aloes* is a play with obviously stronger political implications than *Master Harold*. There are political undertones in *Master Harold*, as there are arguably in all South African writing, but they are muted here. Both plays are essentially about intimate, private causes of pain. Piet Bezuidenhout has suffered droughts before and will, we can presume, endure the current political one. Yet his sharpest pain is caused by his wife’s response to his failed political involvement and the doubt his friend Steve feels about him. Gladys articulates something of the quality of this private suffering when she refers to her own disturbed inner life:

> . . . I accept, Steven, that I am just a white face on the outskirts of your terrible life, but I’m in the middle of mine and yours is just a brown face on the outskirts of that. Do you understand what I’m saying? I’ve got my own story. I don’t need yours. I’ve discovered hell for myself. It might be hard for you to accept, Steven, but you are not the only one who has been hurt. Politics and black skins don’t make the only victims in this country.

(p. 74)

Gladys is both right and wrong. We all have our own existential hells. Yet, in terms of the play, Gladys’s breakdown has been directly caused by the enforcement by the Secret Police of submission to the apartheid state on the Bezuidenhouts, on Steven, and on their “group”. Gladys should have said, “black skins don’t make the only victims in this country” and left out the word “politics”. Thus, in the South African context, it becomes difficult to
separate the private and the public causes of pain. Yet, undeniably, thrown back on their own personal resources, none of the three can help the others. 

Hallie’s distress arises out of a mortification he feels over a shameful father, but one whom he nonetheless loves. His clumsy and misguided attempts to achieve self-worth and status take the form of demeaning the one person who, because of Hallie’s youthfulness and lack of power, he can demean — a black man employed by his parents. And it is here that I would like to point to the several references to physical punishment and beatings in the play. Hallie, a schoolboy in 1950, is subject to beatings; Willie beats his wife; and Sam relates graphically the way convicts are caned in prison as part of their sentences. Hallie, a boy, lacks power in the social hierarchy, just as women and blacks do. So he (figuratively) beats Sam down to give himself a temporary delusion of power.

Master Harold, like Aloes, ends without a reconciliation between the two people who, in each case, have been close and then become estranged. Sam tries to re-establish a situation of affection and respect with Hallie, warning him that something should have been learnt that afternoon. But Hallie leaves the tea-room saying, “I don’t know. I don’t know anything anymore” (p. 94). And in Aloes Steve leaves Piet without a handshake. But, at least, before the curtain drops on Master Harold, the audience is regaled with Sam and Willie dancing together. Perhaps we can interpret this final action as a statement that life goes on (on their own terms) for black people, in spite of the stupidity, cruelty, and narrowness of whites.

There are interesting similarities between the characters of Gladys Bezuidenhout and young Hallie. Both are overly self-conscious and self-absorbed. Gladys feels betrayed by Piet (to the point of breakdown and beyond) because she had allowed him to persuade her to write her most intimate and secret thoughts in diaries. When Piet became politically involved with blacks, their house was searched by the Special Branch and her diaries were confiscated and read. She was led to a position of trust and self-trust by Piet and then brutally exposed to the eyes of hostile strangers. She turns on Piet, accusing him (although she knows he was faithful) of being the informer of the group, and almost malevolently forcing him to acknowledge the paucity of their lives.

The security of Hallie’s world was shaken when he was phoned and told to bring his drunk father home from a bar. Being alone at home at the time, and small and helpless, he had to get Sam to carry the unconscious, befouled man home through the streets. Sam, to salvage the small boy’s pride, made him a kite and taught him how to fly it. Afterwards, happy and triumphant, Hallie sat on a park bench but was not joined by Sam, it being
a "whites only" bench (a detail Hallie subconsciously suppresses in the later reminiscences). But Hallie's saviour is a black man, a person socially beneath him, so in effect he has not been uplifted at all. If he wishes to become top-dog in his apartheid world, he has to spurn Sam and reduce him to under-dog — which he does, while feeling obscurely betrayed.

The reader cannot condone but can understand Hallie's confusion as his milieu turns into an unsafe place. He dreads the responsibility of his bedridden, alcoholic father, but being "grown up", he can no longer accept Sam, a black man, as his parent and confidant. All he can do is try to reduce Sam to the degraded position of his own father, and thus decrease his own inner conflicts and increase his sense of self. All Gladys can do (in the absence of any ability to support Piet in his drought-stricken world) is retreat to her own mental preoccupations and return to a nursing home called "Fort England", while Steve emigrates to England itself.

It seems to me that no lessons are learnt. The aloes can only teach Piet to wait. But for what? The play doesn’t tell us. Sam tries to teach Hallie that he doesn't have to assume a position "up there" on a "whites only" bench, but Hallie turns away. Sam and Willie dance a sentimental foxtrot — very ably, I am sure — and the reader is left, like a camera lens being twirled haphazardly, focusing on 1950, 1963, 1982, and trying to make connections.

NOTES
2. I am using a typed script obtained from the Yale Repertory Company. I have not seen a performance of Master Harold so have had to limit myself to impressions gained from reading the text.
3. In his review titled "Madness, England, or Plants?" Karl von Holdt raises this point as well. He writes: "So A Lesson from Aloes provides no lesson. What Fugard omits from his equation is the new generation of resistance politicians, those who have learnt from the naivety of the Piets and Steves, and who know the struggle is long, arduous and, as Steve puts it, 'without rules'. Speak, Autumn 1979, p. 43.
4. The characterization of Piet Bezuidenhout does border on the stereotypic, but Von Holdt maintains that "These characters are too complex to be stereotypes ... : Rather, Piet, Gladys and Steve embody different facets of our national psyche in their relationship with the country; in these terms they are certainly able to realise the reality we live" (p. 42). It does not seem to me that Von Holdt has made any case against stereotyping in the play; that Piet, Gladys, and Steve are representative of "facets" is a clear enough case for their flatness.