

‘The great change’: Herbert Dhlomo’s “An Experiment in Colour”

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Abstract In 1945, the South African writer and journalist Herbert Dhlomo wrote an article in *The Democrat* where he stated: “Obliged to live as a begging worker in the city and a comparatively free kraal-head in his rural home, the tribal African has a Jekyll-and-Hyde existence”. Ten years before, in 1935, he had published a short story, “An Experiment in Colour”, in which the protagonist changes from black to white (and back) after discovering a miraculous serum, thus acquiring a double identity very much like Jekyll’s – and similarly socially destructive. The short story is challenging: as a cultural ‘product’ of two prominent South African missionary institutions (American Board Mission and Glasgow Missionary Society), Dhlomo had imbibed the project of a thorough reformation of the ‘Bantu’ man – that ‘great change’, both in the private and in the social sphere, that only Christianity could put in motion. And yet, from the very beginning of his literary production, Dhlomo has responded to the missionary project in an ambivalent way. ‘An Experiment in Colour’ is both a dystopic literary response to contradictory social pressures, and a disquieting narrative that denounces alarming social problems.

Keywords South Africa. Early 20th century. Mission literature. H.I.E. Dhlomo. Short story.

Summary 1 Herbert Dhlomo, Missionary Education and Projects for Humankind. – 2 “An Experiment in Colour”. – 3 Race, Class, and the Cultural ‘Great Change’.



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1 Herbert Dhlomo, Missionary Education and Projects for Humankind

There are two ways in which Herbert Dhlomo’s first published work of fiction, the short story “An Experiment in Colour” (1935), can be associated with the issue of social planning – more specifically, with the idea that entire communities of people can be transformed and re-shaped by implementing specific projects for human development. The first and most straightforward connection has to do with the theme of the short story itself, which deals with a young South African scientist determined to solve the racial problem through the biochemical manipulation of certain glands (possibly endocrine glands), with the effect of changing a black man into a white and vice versa. The second connection with social planning is subtler, and regards Dhlomo’s literary production as such: educated in a South African religious mission during the first decades of the twentieth century, the Zulu writer Herbert Isaac Ernest Dhlomo (1903-56) can be considered, at least to a certain extent, a product of the missionary effort to shape human beings into a religious and social model of ‘believer-citizens’. The project of reforming both the private and the public identity of the ‘black man’ had a twofold aim: to bring the natives to the Christian God, and to reconcile them with their European colonisers and political governors. The religious authorities of the manifold missions (belonging to different denominations) that had proliferated in the southern part of Africa since the beginning of the nineteenth century contributed in due course to shape a class of South African black writers, journalists and, in a word, intellectuals, among whom Herbert Dhlomo is highly representative.¹

Dhlomo was taught to read and write in Zulu and English in Johannesburg, at the American Board Mission in Doornfontein; in 1922 he moved to the south of Durban and enrolled for the Teachers’ Training Course at the Amanzimtoti Training Institute, later renamed Adams College – itself a missionary institution, established in 1853 by the American Board on the site of a mission station founded by Newton Adams. A third crucial religious institution for Dhlomo’s cultural development was Lovedale, originally situated on the Ncera stream

¹ To this day, the most complete and thoroughly researched intellectual biography of Herbert Dhlomo is Tim Couzens’ *The New African* (1985), which, although dated, is still an invaluable source of information. Somewhat disregarded by literary criticism (especially as far as his narrative is concerned), Dhlomo’s works include plays, poems, short stories, an ‘abortive’ novel, essays, and an impressive amount of journal articles. In 1985 Visser and Couzens published a collection of the writer’s literary works (plays, poems and short stories). In 1977 a special issue on Dhlomo appeared in *English in Africa* (vol. 4, issue 2). On Dhlomo’s narrative and journalism, see also Zander 1999, Masilela 2007, and Voss 2012.

in 1824 by the Glasgow Missionary Society, and in 1838 re-built on the Tyume river, near present-day Alice (Eastern Cape Province). Lovedale was the most relevant establishment for the development of black literature in the Xhosa language area, not only because of an educational activity begun as soon as 1838 and protracted until 1953, when the Bantu Education Act superseded missionary education, but also in consideration of its printing activity. The missionaries had installed a printing press in their premises since the 1820s, and soon Lovedale had become the most important printing site of the region. More than a century later, it was to the Reverend Robert Henry Wishart Shepherd (1888-1971) – Lovedale’s director of publications from 1932 –² that Herbert Dhlomo would submit his first literary works for publication, including a novel entitled *Experiment in Colour*, like the short story taken into consideration here.

Deeply involved in the missionary educational undertaking at different levels (as pupil, teacher, and writer), the young Dhlomo had imbibed the project of a thorough reformation of the ‘Bantu man’, which would bring about the ‘great change’, both in the private and in the social sphere, that only Christianity could put in motion.³ Yet, from the very beginning of his literary production, Dhlomo responded to the missionary project in an ambivalent way: employed in the field of education and totally convinced of the importance of art and literature in the development of a ‘civilised’ nation, the young teacher and journalist gradually began to notice the contradictions between a ‘levelling’ Christian message, which maintained that all believers are equally God’s children with no distinction of colour, language and culture, and a colonial practice based on racial discrimination and the depredation of the land’s resources.⁴ Born in 1903, the Zulu writer grew up in one of the most contradictory periods of South African history, when strong drives towards the construction of a national state coexisted with extreme social and territorial fragmentation, and when assimilationist projects – albeit cautious and paternalistic, and limited to an educated black elite – were counterbalanced and finally undermined by crude white suprematism, itself confirmed and

² For the history of Lovedale Institution see, among many other records, Stuart 1894 and Shepherd 1971. On Lovedale Press, see also Peires 1979 and White 1992.

³ James Stewart, second Principal of Lovedale (from 1870 to his death in 1905), stated that “When a man is Christianized – that is, when the great change has really taken place in him – he is generally civilized as well” (Stewart 1894, 10).

⁴ David Attwell deals with the controversial relationship between black intellectuals of the early 20th century and missionary ideology, and remarks that “Ambiguity is [...] an endemic feature of the written language of the earliest generations of black writers” (1999, 268). On the complex ideological assumptions of evangelical missions in South Africa in the 19th and early 20th centuries, see Comaroff 1997; Elbourne (2002) deals with the early period of missionary activity in the Cape Colony (1799-1853) in light of its social and political significance.

enhanced by an increasing consensus on the discourse of racial science.⁵ The governments that succeeded one another between 1910 and 1948 basically resorted to racial segregation in order to face the ideological and material challenges of a country in rapid transformation, that in a few decades had moved from a predominantly rural economy to an industrialisation process, required by the diamond and gold mining operations. By 1948 – when the National Party won the general elections and started implementing its apartheid policy on a systematic basis – the process of discrimination of South African citizens on racial grounds had already permeated the most important aspects of everyday life: political rights and representation, labour, residence, property, social and individual liberties, education. The 1920s and the 1930s in particular, when Dhlomo entered adult life, witnessed an intensification of segregationist policies, which culminated in the so-called Hertzog Bills of 1936.⁶ The young teacher’s progressive political commitment throughout the 1920s is witnessed by the several articles he started contributing to the Zulu/English newspaper *Ilanga Lase Natal* (*The Natal Sun*, founded by John Dube in 1903) – a pioneering weekly journal that tackled a whole range of contemporary issues concerning politics and the black condition (Zander 1999, 120-1). In those first years of journalistic activity, Dhlomo wavered between vigorous criticism of segregationist policies and a strong faith in the eventual peaceful fusion of black and white; in the words of Tim Couzens, “although there were numerous setbacks, mainly in the form of repressive and discriminatory laws, Dhlomo believed that a ‘new era’ was at hand and progress was evolutionarily inevitable” (1985, 65). Such confidence in a consensual and, as it were, unavoidable resolution of the racial conflict in South Africa would not last long: already in the late Thirties, Dhlomo’s literary production was the expression of his cultural and political commitment to the retrieval of Zulu, Xhosa, and Sotho history, in view of a profound re-thinking of the cultural basis on which a renovated South African nation could be built.⁷

⁵ On the progressive erosion of assimilationist thought in South Africa between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, see Maylam 2001, 127-35.

⁶ The ‘Hertzog’ or ‘Native’ Bills were promulgated under J.B.M. Hertzog’s and Jan Smuts’ coalition government in 1936-37; first presented to Parliament in 1926 (but passed only ten years later), they were segregationist measures meant to restrict or abolish residual native rights, like the Cape African franchise (Representation of Natives Act), and to enhance territorial segregation and dispossession (Native Trust and Land Act and Native Laws Amendment Act).

⁷ Between 1936 and 1937 Dhlomo wrote five plays based on the lives of great Zulu and Sotho leaders; these – together with several essays and journal articles dealing with the social importance of drama and with the need to re-read and re-tell the story of indigenous South African past – were meant to provide a counter-narrative against white historiography, and to restate the dignity of African precolonial society. At the

The following pages provide both a reading of Dhlomo’s short story “An Experiment in Colour”, published in 1935 in *The African Observer*, and a comment on the cultural milieu in which it was written, with a particular focus on the writer’s involvement in some of the most controversial issues of his time. At the beginning of the 1930s, Dhlomo was part of an intellectual circle that considered fiction-writing, essay-writing and, above all, journalism as the proper means to promote gradual but steady progress of the black people towards modern society. Notwithstanding a widespread racist hegemonic discourse, and the segregationist direction that both national and local South African legislation was taking, the Zulu writer still believed that only through education and intellectual improvement would blacks finally earn assimilation into the white community, thus becoming fully integrated citizens of their own country.

2 “An Experiment in Colour”

It is graduation day at the Bantu College of Fort Hare, South Africa. Frank Mabaso, the protagonist of “An Experiment in Colour”, is one of the ten graduands who are about to obtain their BA degrees; the students are listening to the Vice-Chancellor’s speech for the occasion. Thus, Herbert Dhlomo’s short story makes clear from the very beginning that the environment in which its characters move is culturally advanced, given that Fort Hare University was, in the 1930s, the most important institution for the higher education of black South Africans.⁸ Frank Mabaso is unusually struck by the topic of the Vice-Chancellor’s speech, which is, surprisingly for such a ceremony, the issue of race relations. The aim of that talk becomes clear when the executive gives voice to his hopes, namely that graduates from Fort Hare will actively contribute to the solution of the race problem by putting their knowledge and expertise to the service of an urgent, al-

same time, Dhlomo never betrayed his dislike for tribal mentality and habits; his plays are also profoundly critical of the way in which several African leaders *de facto* facilitated colonial expansion by disregarding the importance of peace and political unity among native tribes. On Dhlomo’s historical drama see, among others, Peterson 1991 and 2000; Wenzel 2005; Voss 2012. Jennifer Wenzel also discusses Dhlomo’s ideal of a “transtribal, new national unity” (2005, 59).

8 Fort Hare University, originally called The South African Native College, was founded in 1916 in the territories adjoining Lovedale mission station and put under the chairmanship of the Principal of Lovedale. Built on the site of a British military stronghold (Fort Hare), it grew and expanded in the following years, until in 1923 it was given the standing of a University College. Robert H.W. Shepherd, Lovedale’s Principal from 1942 to 1955, would write with undeniable satisfaction: “Thus it came to pass that the largest fort ever built to keep the Africans of the Eastern Cape in order was transformed into the place of their highest education” (Shepherd 1971, 74).

beit highly controversial, cause. Mabaso is mesmerised by the brief report on the most recent outcomes of biochemical research given by the Vice-Chancellor, who quotes an article in an English journal and hypothetically applies its results to the modification of “racial character”:

Results in biochemical research reveal that most human ills originate from glandular disorders [...] the treatment or excision of certain glands, or the injection of secretions from these glands in cases where they are absent, would prevent and cure most diseases. More than this, glandular action and secretions are an important factor in determining individual and racial character. (Dhlomo [1935] 1985, 489)

The Vice-Chancellor argues that there are two methods by which it is possible to solve the racial problem: firstly, to “tolerate, allow and even encourage intermarriage” (489) in order to obtain intermediate races or even a unique, universal race – a solution promptly dismissed because “repugnant to members of all races for purely sentimental reasons” (489). The second method concerns the biochemical field of research, which plants its seeds in Mabaso’s brain at the time of his graduation and gives fruit after a couple of years, when a project of ‘genetic engineering’ *ante litteram*⁹ captures all his energies and intellectual faculties: if scientific research could find the means to manipulate the glandular action that plays a part in determining racial character, it would be possible to produce racially homogeneous human beings. Actually, the Vice-Chancellor had concluded by rejecting the idea of a single cosmopolitan race; he had rather envisaged the solution to the race question as a “slow, gradual, methodical process” (489), that Fort Hare intellectuals were encouraged to promote. Frank Mabaso was to offer, instead, an instantaneous and artificial remedy to the problem of racial discrimination: an injection capable of changing the skin colour of an individual, and also some of his somatic features.

Since one of the keys to the interpretation of this story is Dhlomo’s attitude not only towards colour, but also towards the issue, pivotal within his intellectual circle, of social class, some parts of the narrative dealing with the living conditions of blacks in pre-apartheid Johannesburg cannot be omitted.¹⁰ The first couple of years of the protagonist’s life as a young graduate are encouraging: he is able to find

⁹ The first decades of the twentieth century saw the birth and fast development of modern genetics, in the wake of the rediscovery of Mendel’s theories at the turn of the century.

¹⁰ Couzens hints at the class question: “By juggling with the factor of race, Dhlomo handles the old debate of race and class by coming down firmly on the side of those who say that class equalities should be a stronger binding force than race” (1985, 182).

a good job and to live in what is generally called the middle state of life; he becomes the headmaster of a big African school and marries a loving young wife. They can afford living in Sophiatown – defined by the external narrator as the “aristocratic Bantu township” (490) of Johannesburg – and they soon have a baby. Yet, the conclusion of the Vice-Chancellor’s speech, that Mabaso at the time had interpreted negatively, lives on in his memory: he cannot come to terms with the idea that “black must remain black, white white, and that we should bring harmony into this land despite this inescapable difference of colour” (490). Frank is profoundly disappointed by the social injustices he must put up with in everyday life; the story lingers on an episode in which he and his wife Mabel, who want to spend an evening outside, are hindered from going to the theatre in Johannesburg because of seemingly petty impediments and inconveniences (in fact, the consequence of legal injunctions implementing urban segregation), like an overcrowded, dirty “Bantu bus”, a very long queue in front of His Majesty’s theatre – where blacks can gain admission only to the gallery, anyway – and the fact that they must give precedence also to the belated whites, who can jump the line of blacks patiently waiting their turn. “Colour, colour, colour” (491), Frank repeats obsessively. In the end, they do not gain entrance, neither to His Majesty’s, nor to the Standard Theatre; they try to go to a “poorly organised [...] African dancing centre”, but on the way Frank must endure the humiliation of being asked for his ‘pass’¹¹ twice and of being insulted – “damned kaffir”, “bloody cheeky nigger” (492) – by coarse and possibly illiterate policemen. The issue of social class is at least as important here as that of colour: Frank is incensed by the idea of being vituperated by people who have no right whatsoever to abuse a well-dressed, gentlemanlike honest citizen who is, in addition, a distinguished intellectual – except the ‘right’ granted them by the colour of their skin. The narrator – less intrusive here than in other stories by Dhlomo, but still present and vigilant – promptly ironises on the fact that “no kaffir is a citizen, of course” (492).

It is at that point that Frank decides to make a big change in his life by taking up a course in medical science. He fully immerses himself in his studies and experiments, which start weighing heavily on the family budget; he gets poorer and poorer, in addition to consuming his mental and physical health. Frank also starts neglecting his

11 The so-called ‘pass laws’ were a form of internal passport system devised to keep the black population under control and to implement racial segregation, by regulating the basis on which blacks could work or reside in white areas. Frank Mabaso has an exemption because of his social status as an ‘educated black’ – see the measures taken by the Godley Commission of 1919 on urban areas, which “assumed that black urbanisation was in South Africa to stay and favoured exempting educated black people from the pass laws” (Freund 2011, 236).

by then bewildered wife, and isolates himself from everybody, until he finally discovers the substance which, injected into a human body, can transform a black man into a white and vice versa. That seems to be his solution to the race problem, his project for the 'evolution' of humankind, as he makes clear towards the end of the story in a grand public speech. Very much like Stevenson's Doctor Jekyll, Frank uses himself as test subject, and in a scene which is reminiscent of the last section of *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, "Henry Jekyll's Full Statement of the Case", he hides himself in his laboratory, locks doors and obscures windows, and proceeds with the injection. The experiment is fully successful, and he becomes a perfect white man - "so perfect that his Hamitic features would not betray him" (494). A significant difference between the two stories is that Frank Mabaso, who does acquire a double identity like Jekyll - and, accordingly, adopts a new name for his second self, namely Sydney Park - undergoes no change in character; in a word, he does not become evil like his British counterpart, since his change only concerns his physical aspect. For the rest, he is entirely the same man, with the same consciousness and apprehensions; if Jekyll's experiment revolves around his lifelong concern about "man's dual nature" and the intimate, "perennial war" between good and evil (Stevenson [1886] 1998, 60), Mabaso is instead tormented by a social, not by a private ill: the perennial war between man and man when they happen to have a different skin colour. Nevertheless, even Mabaso's experiment is morally despicable, because socially disruptive: suddenly excited by the freedom of action, the many advantages, and the social recognition granted to a white man, he starts neglecting his wife and child to undertake a mysterious, double existence; effortlessly introduced into white circles, he even starts dating a white young woman, unsurprisingly named 'Clara'. In the long run, however, Frank becomes fully conscious of the suffering that he is inflicting on the two unaware women; in the case of his wife, the situation is made even worse by the destitute conditions in which she and the baby are forced to live as a consequence of his follies. He also realises that he is only taking advantage of unjust privileges, without putting his astounding discovery at the service of his community and of humanity at large. Accordingly, he sets out to organize a big meeting at the Bantu Social Centre,¹² where he is able to invite "prominent social, business, educational and political figures in the European community, and leading African, Indian and coloured people" (496); among the whites,

12 The Bantu Men's Social Centre (founded in 1924 in Johannesburg) was one of the many institutions established between the 1920s and the 1930s to encourage the cultural formation of moderate blacks. Herbert Dhlomo was active there from the beginning of the 1930s (see Couzens 1985, 66 and *passim*).

even four cabinet ministers are summoned to a conference in which the African scholar Frank Mabaso is expected to give “an easy and original solution to the Colour Problem” (496). The speech is delivered passionately and the atmosphere in the hall is tense; Mabaso’s argument apparently supports eugenicist views, since he maintains that the “scavenging process of evolution” (498) can be fostered only by a policy promoting the most capable and talented individuals – regardless of race and colour – whilst ‘removing’ the misfit people of whatever racial group. This is not to be taken as Dhlomo’s own opinion: as we shall see, at the time in which he wrote “An Experiment in Colour” he apparently endorsed the gradual process of pacification between blacks and whites advocated by the Vice-Chancellor at the beginning of the short story. Nevertheless, his protagonist is incensed against “false interpretations of Christianity, nationalism, goodness [...] blind prejudices and beliefs” (498); his exasperation is justifiable, but his arguments sound disturbing:

Certain races and nations, who believe that they are superior to others, will not consent to remove the misfit individuals of their own race and colour, and refuse to help and support fit, talented individuals of other races or colour [...]. The problem is not one of race and colour, but of fitness and ability; not of men, but of man. (Dhlomo [1935] 1985, 498)

The conclusion of the story is tragically grotesque: after delivering his speech in front of the crowded hall, Mabaso announces his solution for the racial problem, namely “a certain European gentleman” (498) whom he invites onstage. After that, he injects himself with his miraculous serum and changes into Sydney Park for a few seconds, before returning as Frank Mabaso thanks to a second injection. Amidst a petrified audience, a deranged, laughing “European” pulls out his revolver and shoots the black scientist dead. The killer’s last words put an end to the story, disclosing his Afrikaner identity: “Goed! Ons wil nie wit kaffirs in ons land hê nie. Waar sou ons vroumense wees?”¹³ The narrator provocatively asks the reader: “The end – or the beginning?” (499).

13 In Visser and Couzens’ edition, the translation is provided in an endnote: “‘Good! We do not want white kaffirs in our country. Where would our women be?’” (1985, 500).

3 Race, Class, and the Cultural ‘Great Change’

The sentence pronounced in Afrikaans by the white murderer brings Tim Couzens to identify “the poor white problem” (1985, 183-5) as one of the most prominent social ills denounced in the short story. Black labour was perceived as a serious threat by white unskilled workers - mainly dispossessed, impoverished Afrikaners drawn to the gold-mining industry for subsistence - since the blacks’ low wages were much more competitive on the labour market. In addition, poor whites, forced to share the same harsh working and living conditions with black people, also felt that their social status was at risk.¹⁴ Couzens draws attention to the fact that both Herbert Dhlomo and his brother Rolfes had tackled the poor-white problem in several articles and in a review (see 1985, 183), and concludes affirming that “the real message of ‘An Experiment in Colour’ is twofold: people of one class should stick together regardless of race, and the ‘poor white’ is [...] the real problem in South African politics” (183). Up to a certain extent, Couzens’ interpretation of the short story can be endorsed; yet, there are other issues that need to be taken into consideration, among which the most prominent, as far as Herbert Dhlomo is concerned, is unquestionably cultural. In a 1931 journal article entitled “Aspects of the Race Problem” (crucial for the short story under scrutiny, as we shall see), Dhlomo raises the question of “the masses” as ‘the real’ political problem in South Africa:

It is the credulity and docility of the masses that produce despair and discontent. It is the unsophisticated, unthinking classes which make exploitation, profiteering and maladministration possible [...] it is their sentimentality, frivolity and lack of the sense of critical evaluation that make it possible for unscrupulous politicians and capitalists to embark on their lucrative task of dividing, corrupting and usurping the power of society. (Dhlomo 1931, online)

The stigmatised masses are never racially identified, but the author’s resentment against them is hyperbolically stated towards the end of the piece, when a long list of incongruous social evils is attributed to the “stupifying ignorance and poor, perverted mentality of the masses”.¹⁵ Ignorance and shallowness seem to be, for Dhlomo, the re-

¹⁴ For the poor-white problem and the strikes and revolts during the Union Government (1910-48), see Maylam 2001, 124-7, and Freund 2011, 224-30. Maylam questions both strict materialist and liberal approaches to the relationship between race and class interests, and takes into consideration economic as well as ideological factors in discussing the ‘poor white’ issue.

¹⁵ In a much later article, “Masses and the Artist” (1943), Dhlomo would argue in favour of the education of the masses abandoning the elitist rhetoric of the 1930s: “The good

al ills of society at the beginning of the Thirties, irrespective of colour differences; as suggested in “An Experiment in Colour”, intellectuals of all races should cooperate first and foremost for the cultural improvement of the country. Herbert Dhlomo’s ideological stance in that phase of his life, although sharply critical of the blatant contradictions of white rule, basically upholds progressivism and assimilation, to be achieved thanks to the commitment of an educated class of people, an undifferentiated élite. The last words in “Aspects of the Race Problem” coincide with the end of the Vice-Chancellor’s discourse at Fort Hare at the beginning of the short story: “the solution of the Race Problem must be a slow, gradual, methodic process” (1931, online). Indeed, not only the end, but the whole of that speech is taken from the above-mentioned article, published on one of the first independent black South African journals, *Umteteli wa Bantu*.¹⁶ The piece mainly tackles a couple of issues: on the one hand, it questions the relevance of coeval scientific research (and eugenics in particular) to the project of racial reconciliation; on the other, it raises vehemently the problem of the illiterate, obfuscated and narrow-minded masses, led by short-sighted and dishonest politicians. It soon becomes clear that the writer does not believe in scientific projects based on the biochemical manipulation of human beings, which, if at all effective, would only bring to the alteration of physical and physiological traits. Since those changes “do not affect or alter mind and intelligence”, and since only “the evolution of the Mind will lead us to peace and harmony despite our points of dissimilarity” (Dhlomo 1931, online), the project of levelling physical differences is totally devoid of meaning.

Tony Voss has defined Dhlomo a “writer of ideas”, and the label can be endorsed, judging from the strict correspondence that his short stories and plays have with many of his journal articles and essays (see Voss 2012, 349-50). It is also apparent that the social message of his fictional works was a milestone in his didactically-oriented literary activity, and that it had to be stated clearly, in order to be unequivocally understood. This explains the writer’s privileged choice of an external intrusive narrator, who can disentangle the meaning of the story for the reader; more problematic appear his dramatic works, since the message in a play is entirely entrusted to its characters, and this

things of life should not be the preserve and privilege of the so-called Great Ones only [...] The Masses must share in these God-given things also [...] The soul of a nation is not its gifted mind only, but the might and meaning of its People” (Dhlomo [1943] 1977, 61).

16 *Umteteli wa Bantu* (The Mouthpiece of the People) was a weekly periodical founded in 1920 as a black organ of the Transvaal Chamber of Mines. See Couzens 1985, 90-2, and Zander 1999, 123-4. Zander mentions the Vice-Chancellor’s speech in “An Experiment in Colour” in the light of his research on the relationship between “factual” and “fictional” texts (1999, 389-90).

renders the identification of the playwright’s opinion much more difficult. Dhlomo’s ideas between the Twenties and the Thirties were probably still acceptable, in the main, to the religious authorities that educated him, gave him a job, and even made possible the publication of some of his fictional works. Yet, there are reasons to believe that the writer was gradually becoming too much of an intellectual, too much of an independent thinker to satisfy his mentors of his unconditional ideological allegiance. When in 1938 Dhlomo sent Reverend Shepherd of Lovedale a novel he had written, entitled *Experiment in Colour*, the director of Lovedale publications rejected it because too propagandistic and unrealistic; that novel never saw the light, and the only taste we have of its plot is the eponymous short story we have discussed. In 1938, Shepherd had also refused to publish some plays by Dhlomo, who was trying to set up a Bantu National Dramatic Movement, or National Theatre; apart from Shepherd’s literary observations – he answered that the plays were “not up to publication standard”¹⁷ – it is also likely that the soon-to-be Principal of Lovedale objected to the social and cultural projects of the by then politically committed black writer.¹⁸

There are many aspects of Dhlomo’s literary activity in the 1930s that still connect his ideological trajectory to the missionaries’ religious and social objectives regarding the black populations of South Africa; in the first place, the choice of writing exclusively in English – that he maintained for the length of his life, notwithstanding the contrary practice of some of his contemporaries¹⁹ – speaks of a strong belief in the necessity of inter-racial communication and of the ‘modernisation’ of the Bantu man. Yet, it would be wrong to dismiss Herbert Dhlomo’s early literary production as a mere echo of missionary ideology, as well as it would be historically unfair to reduce all missionary cultural efforts to the single target of assisting the colonising process in South Africa. Both Dhlomo and his mentors had in common, at least, an idealistic goal: to transform the mind and the existence of their fellow human beings, both blacks and whites, through the enhancement of their cultural life. Only painstaking, patient work on the intellectual development of the people could bring about the ‘great change’ which would finally reconcile human beings with God, and with each other.

17 On Shepherd’s rejection of Dhlomo’s plays and on the ‘failed’ novel *Experiment in Colour* see Couzens 1985, 176-7 and 181-2.

18 On Shepherd’s management of Lovedale press and his activity as ‘censor’, see Peires 1979, White 1992, Couzens 1985, 181-2, Zander 1999, 116-19, and Duncan 2004.

19 A prominent example is Benedict W. Vilakazi’s poetry in Zulu; on the Dhlomo-Vilakazi dispute, which concerned also the language of Bantu literature, see Attwell 2002. On Dhlomo and ‘modernity’ see Masilela’s monograph, entirely dedicated to highlighting how the Zulu writer “actually constructed the theoretical edifice of South African modernity” (2007, 5).

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