The small-town novel in South African English literature (1910-1948)
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Abstract:
This study aims to examine a group of South African novels that have received very little critical attention. Part of the problem is that these works have never been grouped or assessed as belonging to a sub-genre, the South African small-town novel. Although individual texts have been treated to cursory commentary, the joint impact and significance of these works with regard to South African literature in English have never been properly assessed. It is suggested that clustering the works together as small-town novels of the Union period raises important issues and provides valuable insights on a significant period in South African (literary) history. The study's theoretical orientation is based on a model that J.A Kearney proposes in his book Representing Dissension: Riot, Rebellion and Resistance in the South African English Novel (2003). Kearney (xxv) suggests that an important criterion in the study of historical novels is the degree to which the writers' recreation of particular events/historical phases leads them to an awareness of the gap between actual and ideal society. In the introductory chapter a comparative analysis of South African town and farm cultures and their respective representations in literature are used to throw some light on possible reasons for the critical neglect of the novels. A brief historical background is provided with regard to the momentous Union period (1910–1948) which forms the setting for all the novels which are discussed in chronological order in the successive chapters: Stephen Black's The Dorp (1920), C. Louis Leipoldt's The Mask, written in the 1930s though only published posthumously as part of his Valley Trilogy in 2001, Alan Paton's Too Late the Phalarope (1953) and Herman Charles Bosman's Willemsdorp, written in the early 1950s but also only published posthumously in 1977 in a censored version and in 1998 in full. The authors uniformly use the small-town milieu effectively as a microcosmic setting from which to comment on the larger social and political issues affecting South Africa during this period. They provide a socio-political critique on a period in South African history marked by politically volatility and reactionary ideological developments. Black's The Dorp satirizes social intrigue in a fictional town ironically yet appropriately called Unionstad. It reveals the ill effects of historical events such as the Boer War and the 1914 Rebellion (specifically the animosity that it created between English and Afrikaner townsmen) but suggests the possibility of reconciliation. In The Mask, Leipoldt reveals a bleak picture of South African town life that is emblematic of the collapse of Leipoldt's utopian ideal for an egalitarian South African society. In Too Late the Phalarope, Paton dramatizes the devastating personal effects of racially discriminatory laws, which criminalized sexual congress between whites and blacks. Paton's essentially Christian view exposes hypocrisy and moral corruption in the attitudes of racist townsmen (and by implication the national architects of institutionalized racism), but offers the possibility of restoration by means of personal acts of forgiveness. In Willemsdorp Bosman offers probably the most sophisticated exposé of small-town culture as exemplary of everything that was wrong in the society from which apartheid was emerging. The concluding chapter invokes Bawarshi's notions on the value of genre classification and briefly focuses on post-1948 novels, confirming the notion that a continuum exists within the small-town novel sub-genre of the South African novel. Copyright

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