

THEMES OF FAMILY AND SOCIETY IN
DE BOEKEN DER KLEINE ZIELEN¹

Thomas R. Rochon
 University of Michigan

The atmosphere of Small Souls is that of the age of the horse-drawn carriage, the mores of its characters are also of that era, their lifestyle has the rhythm of that period, their "jours" and intrigues possess its tempo; and even though the carriage, together with many of that era's social habits which were considered eternal, has disappeared, it is striking that Small Souls has not become dated in the least.² [All translations in this article are by the editor.]

In De Boeken der Kleine Zielen, a series of four novels about the decline of an upper class family in the Hague around the turn of the century, Louis Couperus is concerned above all with human shortcomings. Fate, decline, egoism, and the lack of a broader perspective or vision are characteristic of all of the characters populating the novel.

¹De Boeken der Kleine Zielen, by Louis Couperus. The series consists of four volumes: De kleine zielen, Het late leven, Zielenschemering, and Het heilige weten. The novels were published between 1901 and 1903 by L. J. Veen of Wageningen. They are also contained in the Verzamelde Werken, volume 5, (Amsterdam: De Samenwerkende Uitgevers, 1952), and are available in English translation as The Book of the Small Souls, (Small Souls, 1914; The Later Life, 1915; The Twilight of the Souls, 1917; and Dr. Adriaan, 1918), translated by Alexander Teixeira de Mattos, (New York: Dodd, Mead).

²De sfeer van De Kleine Zielen is de sfeer der rijtuigen, de zeden der toenmalige Hagenaars zijn rijtuigzeden, hun leefwijze heeft het rythme der rijtuigen, hun jours en hun intrigues hebben rijtuigtempo; en waar met de voornaamheid van dat rijtuig ook vele destijds onvergankelijk geachte maatschappelijke vormen der Hagenaars zijn verdwenen, daar treft het te sterker, dat de "kleine zielen" van Couperus volstrekt niet historisch zijn geworden.

These shortcomings operate at two levels. In one sense, the human race is an imperfect species which cannot go beyond a certain level of collective achievement. There is in the series an acute awareness of fate, particularly of death. Several of the characters have premonitions of the future, but none are able to act constructively on their foretaste of events to come. Instead, Mamma van Lowe and Constance are merely paralyzed with fear by the things that they see. Human freedom and sense of choice are but an illusion. We are swept along by time and by forces that we cannot control and can only dimly apprehend. Thus, at least, runs Couperus's vision of the relationship between Man and Destiny.

However, the shortcomings of the "small souls" in Couperus's novel are also due in part to learned patterns of social behavior. In the Van Lowe family, materialism, hypocrisy, and jealousy between siblings seem to be the accepted way of things. Each family member, with the possible exception of Gerrit, looks anxiously to the others to be sure that nobody gets too far ahead. In fact, the collective mediocrity of the Van Lowe family is probably the only thing that keeps it together.

As noted in the review quoted at the beginning of this article, Couperus's description of the "smallness" of the Van Lowe family is really intended as a portrait of the narrow vision of the upper class circle in the Hague at that time. Couperus was at the edge of that circle as he was growing up, and doubtless later became more familiar with it as a major literary figure who sometimes visited or lived in the Hague. He obviously was not charmed by what he saw of that circle. One of the themes that runs through a number of Couperus's novels is that of the opposition between East and West, as well as between North and South. His personal preference is for the East (for example, the Indies) and for the South (the Mediterranean), although Couperus admits that he himself is a man of the West and North.

In De Kleine Zielen, Couperus wanted to demonstrate the smallness of soul, heart, and mind especially characteristic of the turn-of-the-century upper class of the Hague's society. He chose to do this through a detailed portrait of the members of a single family, the Van Lowes. The scenes in which the smallness of that society is most evident are those which bring outsiders into the picture. For example, consider the round of Sunday visits that Karel and Cateau, and Adolphine and Van Saetzema, make. The ritual of the small talk, the cup of coffee, the leaving of cards for those who are not at home, and the checking off of obligated visits fulfilled, are all done despite a boredom and loathing of the whole process. In the tradition of Molière on the foibles of the French aristocracy, Couperus makes us aware of the prisons people build for themselves through unthinking adherence to social custom.

And yet, Couperus almost unnaturally uses a family to illustrate his point. Although the Van Lowes naturally have contacts with people outside of their family, only in Brauws do we get a well-rounded portrait of anyone other than a Van Lowe (although it can be argued that Addy's wife, Mathilde, is not really "family" either). Other individuals outside of the family, such as Ernst's landlords and Pauline, have only cameo roles for the purpose of giving us more information about a member of the family.

Why the focus on family when it makes at least as much sense to focus on the coterie, or social circle? The answer to this question will not be sought in Couperus's life, or even in his work. Instead, I will employ an "external" analysis. Elements of literary tradition and scientific knowledge (in its state at the time Couperus was writing) will be used to provide an answer to this question.

Let us begin with literary tradition. De Boeken der Kleine Zielen belong quite clearly to one of literature's

oldest traditions, that of tragedy. There are two levels of tragedy present in the series. First, there is the "tragic" decline of the Van Lowe family. Pappa van Lowe had been Governor-General of the Dutch Indies, a position which none of his sons came close to attaining. This is the decline which is remarked upon by Constance as she gazes with Dorine at the portrait of her father shortly after her return from Brussels. Decline in the family is further evidenced by insanity or other forms of psychological disturbance which occur in a number of family members (Ernst, Gerrit, Paul), and in the feeble-mindedness which appears in the third generation (Klaasje).

Couperus also has in mind a greater tragedy as he unfolds the tale of the Van Lowes. That is the tragedy of mankind helpless before the working of fate. Couperus would like us to believe that fate is something absolutely beyond the capacity of man to control. He suggests that both mystic and scientific attempts to change the course of events are doomed. On the mystic side, we have the visions of Mamma and Constance, both of whom see their own future in fleeting moments of shocking clarity, and both of whom are unable to do anything to alter the fate they see before them. Mamma, whose clairvoyance is the most consistent, is finally reduced to repeating over and over that "Er is geen licht."³

Addy represents the scientific approach to changing the course of fate. Although Couperus probably had a more generalized vision of the importance of fate, he uses death to illustrate our helplessness before it. To struggle against fate, Addy becomes a doctor, dedicated to reducing suffering and postponing death. In a sense, Addy is successful. He is able to slow the decline of some members of the family through his medical knowledge, which is of a mystical sort,

³At the end of Zielenschemering, the third volume: "There is no light."

relying on hypnotism and suggestion rather than drugs. His successes (Klaasje, Marietje van Saetzema) are only partial, however; fate still prevails.

Now, the family is the classic milieu for showing tragic decline and the workings of fate. The Old Testament follows the epic struggles and triumphs of the Chosen People, an extended family divided into twelve tribes. The early Greek tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles all center on a tragic course of events within a single family. Shakespeare's tragedies, such as Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, and King Lear, focus on events within a family. In contemporary American drama, O'Neill has used the family powerfully in Long Day's Journey Into Night and in Mourning Becomes Electra. Among American novelists, William Faulkner has chronicled several generations of Compsons, Sutpens, and Snopes in his tale of the corruption and decline of the South. The family as symbol of tragedy greater than itself thus has a long history which starts with the beginnings of literature and continues to the present.

The Father is the State, the Mother is the Family, the Child, all youthful humankind thrown into the arena of conflicting experience.⁴

Such themes as State, Family, and Conflict are universal, and in fact such an interpretation of the symbolic meaning of the family fits the Van Lowes. It is true that Henri van der Welcke does not exactly represent a symbol of the State. Yet, in a sense, Henri is not a father at all. Couperus goes to great lengths to present him as a boyish man, more an older brother to Addy than his father. The real father symbol in the series is Pappa van Lowe himself, who as Governor-General comes as close to a regal personification of the State as a bourgeois society will allow. Constance and Mamma van Lowe both live a

⁴Sven Armens, Archetypes of the Family in Literature (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966), p. 52.

selfless life, giving up their own identities and aspirations for their families. Only for one moment does Constance consider striking out on her own, when she offers a separation to Henri van der Welcke so that she will be free to live with Brauws. She is later glad that the opportunity is denied her, and is content to devote herself afresh to her child.

Addy is Child. "Youthful humankind thrown into the arena of conflicting experience" summarizes perfectly the relationship between Addy and his parents. The irony is that the very experience of being the only neutral ground in his parents' stormy marriage has deprived Addy of his youth.

Thus, the description of symbolic roles taken on by the various family members in Greek tragedy appears to fit very closely the family which Couperus presents to us. The active interest which Couperus took in ancient civilizations (especially the Roman but doubtless the Greek as well) means that this resemblance is almost certainly not the result of chance alone.

Nor did the use of the family as vehicle for tragedy come about as the result of chance. Families are our oldest social institution, and the one which comes closest to being a universally understood human experience. Once again Armens puts it well in his analysis of Greek tragedy:

The poets of Greek Tragedy seem to realize that nothing seems to excite our sensibilities as much as a violation of the sanctity of the hearth, or a depiction of the success or failure on the part of the family to provide for the needs of one another. Not only Sophocles, but Aeschylus and Euripides also, recognize the value of such material as a means of reaching the profoundly unconscious responses of their audiences.⁵

The point about reaching "profoundly unconscious responses" is particularly well taken in light of what we now know about the importance of early experiences and relationships for individuals throughout their lives. One does not have to be

⁵Sven Armens, op. cit., p. 93.

a Freudian in order to accept the importance of an individual's family for providing one with a social position, a psychological viewpoint, and a collective identity. Family relationships are our earliest relationships, and they are the ones upon which we are the most dependent and which are most central to our identities. For that reason, a tragedy which involves a family will be a tragedy which touches an audience most deeply. Arthur Miller, who has employed the family in a number of his plays (Death of a Salesman, The Price) to provide the level of tension and drama that can only come from the deepest of personal relationships, describes the phenomenon as follows:

The more or less hidden impulse . . . is the memory of both playwright and audience of an enfolding family and of childhood. It is as though both playwright and audience believed that they once had an identity, a being, somewhere in the past. . . .

The concepts of Father, Mother, and so on were received by us unawares from the time we were conscious of ourselves. In contrast, the concepts of Friend, Teacher, Employee, Boss, Colleague, Supervisor, and the many other social relations came to us long after we gained consciousness of ourselves, and are therefore outside ourselves. . . . What we feel is always more "real" to us than what we know, and we feel the family relation while we only know the social one.⁶

Thus, one reason for the use of a family to portray what is essentially a novel about a social group is that this choice is evocative of a long line of tragedies, and that the family is an experience that is particularly close to all readers. A second line of reasoning that also leads to the choice of family comes from scientific knowledge at the turn of the century. In this period, genetic interpretations of human behavior were perhaps at their peak of respectability. Intellectuals, including historians and sociologists, were profoundly influenced by Darwin and the theory of natural

⁶Arthur Miller, "The Family in Modern Drama." The Atlantic Monthly, 197 (April, 1956), pp. 25-41. Quotation from pp. 32, 39-40.

selection. Human behavior was seen as explainable in the same terms as one would explain the behavior of other animals, and the effect of environment as a modifier of the genetic inheritance was heavily discounted.

This gives the family a special significance, since it is composed of individuals who share in the same genetic pool. One effect of the emphasis on genetics at the time was to justify the intergenerational continuity of the wealthy and powerful classes. After all, people who are more able than others will also have children who are more able than others. Yet, Couperus presents us with a family in decline. In doing so, he implies a degeneration in the genetic talent of the human race. Likewise, his concern for the distinction between "Dutch blue eyes" and "soft brown eyes," as well as for the mixing of Dutch and Indonesian blood that has taken place in the family, are expressions of the conviction that people's fates are bound up in their genetic inheritance. Couperus carries the importance of genes to an extreme position (but one which would be accepted by his contemporaries) in his discussion of the "nervous" temperament which is rooted in the blood of the Van Lowes.

Obviously, the novel would not have been able to focus on these aspects of "blood" (Couperus's synonym for genes) if it centered on a social circle composed of unrelated individuals. There are throughout the series a number of hints at incestuous relationships, which carry the significance of genetic determination to its logical conclusion. The affection between Emilie and Henri van Naghel, between Otto and Louise van Naghel, and between Henri van der Welcke and Marianne van Naghel, of which only the first was perhaps consummated, all are intended to convey that the sickness which has stricken the family is only likely to be further inbred. The only escape for the Van Lowes would be through a transfusion of new blood of the sturdy, simple, "trouwe

blauwe ogen" type.⁷ As Addy's doomed marriage to Mathilde shows, there are to be no external sources of relief from the decline of the Van Lowes.

There are two compelling reasons, then, for Couperus to place his novel, a condemnation of the narrow-minded morality of the upper class of the Hague and a lament about the futility of the human enterprise in the face of fate, in the setting of a single family. First, in so doing, Couperus is wholly within a long literary tradition which exalts and magnifies man's shortcomings, turning them into tragedies. Secondly, Couperus was being very current in his belief in the determining importance of an individual's genetic inheritance for what he is and what he can become (a belief that is today enjoying a resurgence of interest among sociobiologists).

The choice of a family focus also has important consequences for the plot and style of the book. A book about a family is bound to be a book about a group of people who know each other very intimately and who react to each other very intensely. Not very much happens during the 666 pages and ten years of the four novels in De Boeken der Kleine Zielen. In terms of events, the highlight occurs in the first fifty pages of the series, when Constance returns home to the family. Instead, the development of the novel is tied up in the psychological development of the characters, and in their relationships with and reactions to each other. It is a novel of interiors, while a novel about a social class would probably have to derive its tension and motivation more from exterior events occurring in the environment of the characters. A "disturbed" family--one in which communication is lacking, a crime has been committed, one or more of the members is in physical decline, etc.--often provides the tension that serves

⁷"true, blue eyes."

as the dramatic setting for plays and novels.⁸ Couperus uses this tension not only in De Boeken der Kleine Zielen, but also in Van Oude Menschen de Dingen die Voorbijgaan.⁹

Secondly, there is the matter of style. One of the reviewers of the series remarks that "Wij niet zoo vaak een fragment, een zin, een woord hebben weergezocht, omdat zij ons gefrappeerd hebben door buitengewone schoonheid."¹⁰ That may or may not be due to the limitations of the author. Even if Couperus were capable of lifting his readers to the heights of sublime inspiration through his use of language, the plainer style that he has chosen is more appropriate to his choice of the family as subject. The language of the family is plain language, the style of the family is realism, and the literary impact of a book about the family is through the larger significance of common things commonly done. Arthur Miller notes that:

If, for instance, the struggle in Death of a Salesman were simply between father and son for recognition and forgiveness, it would diminish in importance. But when it extends itself out of the family circle and into society, it broaches those questions of social status, social honor and recognition, which expand its vision and lift it out of the merely particular toward the fate of the generality of men.¹¹

One critic says that the key passage of the entire series comes at the point where Paul discourses on the death of the family in modern society. He claims that "de rest van het

⁸Tony Manocchio and William Pettit, Families Under Stress: A Psychological Interpretation (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975).

⁹Louis Couperus, Van Oude Menschen de Dingen die Voorbijgaan (Wageningen: L. J. Veen, 1906).

¹⁰H. Dekking, De Amsterdammer, March 8, 1903. "We did not go back very often to look for a paragraph, a sentence, a word because it had struck us as being extraordinarily beautiful."

¹¹Arthur Miller, op. cit., p. 37.

boek lijkt geschreven om aan te tonen, dat Paul ongelijk had."¹² It is doubtless simplistic to claim that any one theme holds the key to the entire series. However, Couperus has certainly portrayed a family in which, despite all their troubles and all their petty jealousies, the various members are greatly dependent on each other. The message which Couperus brings us is a very modern one. It is a message of despair, of mankind helpless before fate and thus driven to take refuge in small things. The Van Lowe family is not able to change or deflect its destiny. But they do offer comfort to each other. The existence of the family keeps its members from despair, a fact which is particularly obvious in the final volume. Therefore, Constance's decision to return to her family in the Hague must be seen as the central event from which all the tensions and developments of the four volumes derive. Despite everything, one cannot help but feel that she made the right choice. She would have been much unhappier, and her soul much smaller, had she stayed in Brussels, away from the family.

¹²K. L. Poll, Algemeen Handelsblad, November 8, 1969; "The rest of the book seems to have been written to prove that Paul was wrong."