

**The Popular Gothic Novel**  
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**Lecture 44**  
**Legacies of Empire and Gothic**

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## Week 9: *The Moonstone*

Lecture 9D: Legacies of Empire and Gothic

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Hello and welcome to week 9's lectures on Collins's *The Moonstone*. In today's session, I will be discussing Melissa Free's ideas of legacies of empire in relation to *Moonstone* and I will be eliciting the concept of the Gothic from Free's ideas.

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### The Moonstone and Empire

- "Though Collins's contemporaries were familiar with "empire," they tended to perceive it as something that existed outside of, but not as part of, nation, and his nineteenth-century reviewers - no doubt as a consequence of this belief - did not see *The Moonstone* as a piece of social criticism". (Melissa Free, 2006, p. 344)



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What we understand is that Collins's contemporaries did not really see the idea of the empire as very closely related to the idea of their nation. They thought empire was something that is outside of Great Britain. And therefore, his contemporaries, including Collins’s reviewers did not see the novel Moonstone by Collins as a criticism of the British Empire. They did not see it as a social critique because they thought empire is something that is outside of the nation.

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## The Moonstone and Empire



- “Evoking the sense that home and away are distinct, Margaret Oliphant, in "Sensation Novels," an 1862 article for Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, valorizes the "distant sound of guns," which, even post-Mutiny, do not merely threaten but actually bolster her sense of security along the bank of the Thames: "That distant roar has come to form a thrilling accompaniment to the safe life we lead at home". (Melissa Free, 2006, p.344)



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It is very significant to see how the complications of the colony are not really impinging on the citizens of Great Britain who are within the boundaries of the home. Margaret Oliphant was a prolific writer of the 19th century.

And in her article titled “Sensation Novels” that she wrote for Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine, she celebrates the distant sound of guns, the guns that go off in the colony. She feels that the distant sound of violence and gunshots does not really imply any kind of threat to the home. In fact, it reinforces the safe life that Oliphant and others like her live at home.

So, it is like reading a Gothic novel. You can safely be terrorized by the complications that happen on the pages. And once you have read the novel, you can safely put it away and say these things are not going to threaten me because they are part of fictional narratives. Something similar is being suggested in the views of Margaret Oliphant when she is comparing the Gothic subtext to the colony with the security that she finds at home.

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## The Moonstone and Empire



- “Only in the last thirty years have critics begun to recognize The Moonstone as a critique of British Imperialism. Mid- and even late-twentieth-century critics tended to read the novel as “unencumbered with social themes” (Robinson, 218).<sup>10</sup> When John R. Reed wrote the first postcolonial critique of The Moonstone in 1973, he also reinstated a binary that, I am arguing, Collins was at pains to disavow, reading home (the “personal”) and empire as separate entities (286,288)”
- (Melissa Free, 2006, p.345)



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What Melissa Free is pointing out in these set of ideas is that the novel Moonstone was identified as a criticism of British Imperialism quite recently. The novel had been seen to be free of any kind of social criticism in the perspectives of the critiques until recently.

John Reed was one of the first two according to Melissa Free to write a postcolonial criticism of The Moonstone. And he wanted to point out that the home and the empire cannot be seen as two very distinct or concepts. Melissa Free is also arguing that one cannot see these two entities as distinct and unrelated to one another because we know now that they are very strongly implicated in one another.

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## Imperial Gothic and Violence



- “The removal of the Moonstone from its sacred Indian shine and subsequent relegation to the status of decorative bauble, worn by a descendant of its thief, set in motion imperial repercussions, represented by but not limited to the gemstone's curse, demonstrating that the spoils of imperial plunder yield dire consequences at home - as do bloodshed and silence”.
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“The removal of the Moonstone from its sacred Indian shrine and subsequent relegation to the status of the decorative bauble, worn by a descendant of its thief, set in motion imperial repercussions, represented by but not limited to the gemstone’s curse, demonstrating that the spoils of imperial plunder yield dire consequences at home- as do bloodshed and silence.”


We have seen how that very important theft committed by John Herncastle from an Indian god has very strong repercussions in Great Britain. In fact, it sets in motion a series of events which lead to murder, suicide, and eventually resolution and restitution. So, the message seems to be that imperial plunder will be punished. There will be consequences for this kind of actions performed by an Englishman. There are also repercussions and consequences for bloodshed and silence, and also for complicit behaviour in plunder and bloodshed.

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Imperial Gothic



- “The relationship between India and Britain, the pilfering of India by Britain (twice designated: first, by Herncastle’s penetration of the sultan’s treasury; then, by Blake’s removal of the gem from an Indian cabinet in Yorkshire<sup>23</sup>), is the family curse, the great cover-up. The novel’s literal dirty linen, a stained nightgown, hidden in a quicksand marsh and marked with Franklin Blake’s “OWN NAME” (MS, 310), represents the family’s buried guilt, revealing Blake, rising and ultimately standing patriarch, thus representative of family, and by association, nation, as the diamond thief.”
- (Melissa Free, 2006, 353)
- <https://wiki.uiowa.edu/display/vicwik/The+Moonstone%2C+Wilkie+Collins>



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Free argues that there is a kind of stealing that happens twice. First, it is committed by Herncastle when he thief’s the stone from an Indian temple. And secondly, Blake, also “steals the gem from an Indian cabinet in the home of Rachel Verinder.

So, this kind of pilfering seems to be repetitive and Englishmen seem to compulsively commit this act of thieving. And the novel’s dirty linen is the stained nightgown of Franklin Blake. And what is being argued is that the character of Blake is also somehow stained by his gesture.


And ultimately, we see Franklin Blake as the patriarch of that family. He is the one who is representing the strongest male in that family. And therefore, he is also in a strange way symbolizing the nation itself. And when he is being that kind of a powerful symbol, then it becomes very problematic because he also has the association of the diamond thief.

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Imperial Gothic



- “Renouncing responsibility, Blake claims, “Do what I might, I did it without my own knowledge” (376). The nightgown, smeared with paint that will not wash away, neither with careful scrubbing nor with a year’s worth of immersion in the marsh - neither, that is, with effort or time - identifies Blake as a criminal; the paint cannot cover over but in fact elucidates Blake’s guilt; and the smudge is thus a (family) stain that, though buried, cannot be made to disappear.”
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“Renouncing responsibility, Blake claims, “Do what I might, I did it without my own knowledge”. The nightgown, smeared with paint that will not wash away, neither with careful scrubbing nor with a year’s worth of immersion in the marsh- neither, that is, with effort or time - identifies Blake as a criminal: the paint cannot cover over but in fact elucidates Blake’s guilt; the smudge is thus a family stain, though buried, cannot be made to disappear.”

We know from the novel that Blake did the act of thieving innocently under the influence of opium. And he thinks that he is guiltless because of that unintended stealing. The important evidence, that nightgown has that symbolic stain and that cannot be removed- despite careful cleaning and scrubbing. And in fact, we know that nightgown was also hidden away in the marsh. It was submerged in the marsh.

And despite being buried in that place, in that marshy conditions, we see that that stain has not been removed. So, it is a perpetual stain and that stain is the guilt. That is the symbolic guilt of Franklin Blake, and that is a family’s guilt as well. That is a nation’s guilt as well. It cannot be easily made to disappear. So, crime, even though it is unintended, has its consequences. That crime is a Gothic crime. It is an Imperial Gothic crime.



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## Imperial Gothic and Crime

- “Blake ultimately absolves himself of the crime by absolving himself of wrong intention. In short, he might be heard to say, “The opium made me do it,” since the robbery was committed under the influence of a drug that he did not willingly ingest.”
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We know that Mister Candy gave him that opium without Franklin Blake's knowledge. And therefore, Blake absolves himself of any wrongdoing. Despite that kind of explanation, we do know that an act of thieving was done. So, if you connect it to the idea of the empire that Britain expanded across the globe, regardless of Britain's explanations, the logic for its colonization, we do know that it is a crime that had been committed.



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## Gothic and Imperialist ideology

- “That he unwittingly ingests the drug that causes him unwittingly to steal the diamond compounds the paradoxically active role of oblivion in the novel. [ . . . ] That Blake steals Rachel's diamond out of “good” motives, in order to protect her from its theft by the Indians, does not dismantle this allegory, rather it reenacts Victorian imperialist ideology. (Mehta, 645, 646)”
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It is a fantastic point made by Melissa Free. Blake, without his knowledge, takes the opium. Blake, without his knowledge, steals the diamond from Rachel. Even though he did it when he was under the influence of opium, he did the act of stealing with good motives. He wanted to protect the diamond from being stolen by the Indians.

So, this kind of logic is a logic that does not deconstruct the imperialist ideology of Great Britain. In fact, it reenacts that ideology when Britain says that it is colonizing because the reason behind that colonization is to civilize all the colonized people. Then we know that that is a problematic logic.

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## Imperial Gothic and family



- “His logic of unaccountability, his denial of family agency, which reads his narcotic burglary of the diamond as not quite theft, mirrors his attribution of agency to the Moonstone and his obfuscation of both Herncastle's violence - "the Diamond [. . .] fell into [his] hands" - and of his own role as transmitter of "trouble and terror" - "the Diamond found its way into my aunt's house in Yorkshire [and] came to be lost" (MS, 18, 164, 18; emphases added).”

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Melissa Free is laying bare how Franklin Blake is denying any kind of accountability for his act. He does not think that he had any agency when he burgled that diamond. And that kind




of denial of the agency is taken back into the past by Franklin Blake when he describes the way the diamond came to Herncastle as “the diamond fell into his hands”.

So, if there is a notion of passivity in that idea of “the diamond falling into his hands”. And there is also an idea of passivity when he says that Franklin Blake had unintentionally transmitted “trouble and terror” into the family of the Verinders.

So, this kind of denial of unaccountability and the insertion of an element of passivity is a bit disturbing because we know that there is a massive theft that had been committed by Herncastle and symbolically by Franklin Blake as well when he tried to protect the diamond from the Indians to whom it rightfully belongs. Then we realized that this is a complicated narrative that Franklin Blake tells himself to purge any kind of wrongdoing that had happened in his family.


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### Imperial Gothic and Family

- “In failing to identify Herncastle's theft as imperial plunder - or his own actions as theft, Blake perpetuates the legacy of elusion that is the real family inheritance. As I have demonstrated, this logic is the logic of empire: it, not an Indian bred curse, is the family bequest.”
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So, very clearly, we now understand that Blake refuses to see Herncastle’s plunder as imperial plunder or the plunder of the colony. He refuses to see his own act as a continuation of that kind of imperial plunder. It is a different kind but it is an act of plunder as well. Melissa Free points out that this refusal to see the problem at the heart of the empire is the genuine family inheritance.


That is what is inherited from one another. That is what Herncastle's bequest this to the Verinders family. Even Rachel refuses to throw light on why she has suddenly started to break away from Franklin Blake. So, the bequest of the family is not the curse of the Indian diamond or the Orient. The bequest is that idea of the elusion, or the idea of oblivion.

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Imperial Gothic and Orient



- “The Shivering Sand acts as a synecdoche not simply of the East, as Heller suggests (151), but of a colonized East. Located in England within walking distance of but not visible from the Verinder family estate, the Shivering Sand, violently powerful and hiding not only suffocating subjects but the secrets of their oppressors, lures Rosanna Spearman, the working-class girl with the power to expose Franklin Blake, to its edge - and ultimately into its depths.”
- (Melissa Free, 2006, p.355)
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The Shivering Sand, the marshy space is a synecdoche. It is a representation of not just East but the colonized East, according to Tamar Heller and Melissa. It is not visible from the Rachel Verinder estate but it is close by. It is within walking distance. And Rosanna Spearman is constantly attracted by that space.

And that sand submerges a lot of secrets and subjects and human being as well. Because Rosanna Spearman dies in that space. It draws her into its depths, and to her death. But we see how the secrets also emerge. So the Shivering Sand is a space of imperial Gothic. It is a space where lots of things are buried, but they emerge to throw light on the complications that are present within the West.

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## Imperial Gothic and Orient



- "I think the place has laid a spell on me," she says (MS, 34). Like the diamond and the opium, however, the Sand itself does not inherently possess mystical - read, Eastern - power; rather, it, like those other things Oriental / ized, connotes the secrecy, displacement, and the repudiation of responsibility by means of which imperialism commits so much of its violence"
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“I think the place has laid the spell on me,” she says. Like the diamond, the opium, however, the Sand itself does not inherently possess mystical- read, Eastern- power; rather, it like the other things Orientalized, connotes the secrecy, displacement, and the repudiation of responsibility by means of which imperialism commits so much of its violence”

That space is not mystical. That space is not genuinely Eastern or Oriental. It has been turned into an Eastern and mystical space because that space has come to represent mystery, secrecy, and the idea of disposing of things that cannot be kept within the home.

And that space is also space where responsibilities are given away or shrugged off. And that space also has a lot to say about the nature of imperialism itself. Because imperialism commits a lot of brutality by Orientalizing the other. So, the Shivering Sand is a fantastic space of Gothicism.


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## Gothic Past

- “Rosanna, a reformed criminal now in tenuous possession of a decent job, is herself a figure living with a secret, though perhaps not one she wishes to keep. Rachel's mother, Rosanna's employer, "protects" her newest servant by keeping her past a secret.”
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Rosanna Spearman is a Gothic character. She is a Gothic character in the sense that there is a mystery within her. She has a dark past. And what is the dark past? She had been a criminal, but she is now a reformed criminal. And she has found a job to which she is hanging onto desperately. And her mistress is kind enough to protect her past. So, this characterization is associated with mystery, crime, darkness.


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## Gothic Secrets

- “the nightgown is not permanently buried in the marsh, only suspended there, through a fisherman's chain, sheltered in a "japanned tin case" (209).<sup>26</sup> Thus, while Rosanna sacrifices herself, she does not sacrifice the truth; rather, she bur-ies it for the perpetrator to retrieve, in order to do which he must come face to face with the "false brown face" of the marsh, as he reaches into its depths, unknowingly, for the sign of his own guilt (308). This is the work of Collins' s text: the creation of this opportunity”
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“The nightgown is not permanently buried in the marsh, only suspended there, through a fisherman's chain, sheltered in a “japanned tin case”. Thus, while Rosanna sacrifices herself, she does not sacrifice the truth; rather, she buries it for the perpetrator to retrieve, in order to do what he must come face to face with the “false brown face” of the marsh, as he reaches into its depths, unknowingly, for the sign of his own guilt. This is the work of Collins's text: the creation of this opportunity”.

The Shivering Sand has a Gothic narrative function. The nightgown which is buried there is not buried forever. In fact, Rosanna Spearman had secreted it in such a way that the nightgown can be retrieved if tried and Blake does get it back. It is also very interesting how that space is described in the narrative. It is referred to us as the “false brownface”. You can see how the idea of non-white being associated with falsity. That is very interesting and it is also Oriental and Gothic in tone.

Now, when Rosanna buried it, she intended it to be retrieved by Blake so that he can come face to face with his own guilt. We know that Blake has been rejecting any kind of responsibility. He is avoiding any kind of accountability. And yet Collins through the way he has set-up the narrative makes that space for the kind of associations one can draw. He creates an opportunity for the reader to interpret and come to a conclusion. There is also the opportunity to take away certain messages about the nature of Franklin Blake's crime and guilt.

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## Gothic and Oriental Objects



- “Oriental /ized objects (and matter: the Shivering Sand) in the novel, then, do not have agency - despite Blake's linguistic contrivances - thus denying the very orientalism with which they are superficially imbued. They do not merely reflect but challenge Western (mis)perceptions of the East (as marked by the attributes laid out by Said in Orientalism) by simultaneously reflecting Western - here, English - (mis)perceptions of themselves - as innocent. So while the diamond lacks agency, it transmits, it returns, that with which it is approached.”
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Melissa Free fantastically puts forward a range of points here. Firstly, she argues that oriental objects do not have any kind of agency. There is no mysticism; there is no supernatural stuff embedded in these oriental figures and objects. She is therefore pointing out that such ideas for mysticism are very superficially embedded in these objects.

In fact, these objects apparently reflect what has been associated with them. So, the mysticism is apparently the gift of the Western misperception. The spirituality that is apparently associated with oriental objects are the gifts of the Western misperceptions', falsities. Therefore, the oriental objects are in fact not reflecting the Eastern concepts or ideas or spiritual narratives.

They are reflecting Western or in this case of Collins's *The Moonstone*, they are representing the English misperceptions in order to safeguard the strange logic of Western innocence. So, what we should understand is that the diamond does not possess any kind of voodoo. It does not possess any kind of supernatural spiritual influence. It does not have any kind of agency to harm anybody. It just is an object with which a range of ideas are woven by the Western misconceptions or the narrative of greed which is underlining Western imperialism.

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## Imperial Gothic and the Orient



- “Despite his concerns about “the Indians [who] may be hidden in the house” (419), waiting to violate Rachel’s property), it is Blake himself who, uninvited, crosses the threshold of Rachel’s boudoir, enters her private cabinet, and steals her precious gem.<sup>31</sup> Milligan points out how the trope of “ferocious Indians and vulnerable Englishwomen” is an expression of apprehensions typical of the time.”
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“Despite his concerns about “the Indians who may be hidden in the house” waiting to violate Rachel’s property, it is Blake himself who, uninvited, crosses the threshold of Rachel’s boudoir, enters her private cabinet, and steals her precious gem. Milligan points out how the trope of “ferocious Indians and vulnerable Englishwomen” is an expression of apprehensions typical of the time.”

There are worries about the presence of Indians around the Verinder estate. They are expected to transgress into the private space of this family and steal Rachel’s “property”, “we do know that it is not Rachel’s property. It is a property of the Indians”.

Despite that threat and fear, we see that it is not the Indians who come into the house and cross the threshold, who violate the private space of Rachel’s boudoir. It is Franklin Blake who does that for apparently good intentions. So, instead of Indians, we see the Englishman transgressing the feminine space and stealing the precious gem.

Milligan, the critic also points out that this image of ferocious Indians threatening unprotected Englishwomen was an idea that was floating about at that point of time. There was the design to create apprehensions about the fierce, fierceness or the threat embedded in the bodies of Indians. Thanks for watching. I will continue in the next session.