

The Popular Gothic Novel
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Lecture 45
Imperial Gothic and the Orient

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Week 9: Wilkie Collins The Moonstone



Lecture 9E: Imperial Gothic, and the Orient

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Hello, and welcome to week nine's lectures on the Moonstone. In today's session, I will be discussing the argument on the Imperial Gothic and the Orient in relation to this particular novel.

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Imperial Gothic and Women



- "In depicting the British as motivated by greed, the Indians as inspired by religion, and Rachel as the victim of the former rather than the latter, Collins calls attention to the hypocrisy of the imperial justification for the perpetration of violence against the (sexualized) Other: the protection of "their" women"

- (Melissa Free, 2006, p.358)

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“In depicting the British as motivated by greed, the Indians as inspired by religion and Rachel as the victim of the former, rather than the latter, Collins calls attention to the hypocrisy of the Imperial justification for the perpetration of violence against the sexualized other, the protection of their women”.

In the *Moonstone*, Collins subtly establishes that the Imperial British are acting on the basis of their excessive greed. The Indians are pious and religious-minded in the novel, and Rachel is the victim of not the Indians, but the British. Their Imperial plunder is responsible for the heartache of Rachel. What is being pointed out by Collins in this novel is the hypocrisy, the problematic arguments for Imperial expansion, the problematic justification for enacting violence against the other when the Indians are attacked, when Franklin Blake “steals” the diamond he acts in order to protect his woman.

So that kind of argument and rhetoric does not work any longer as we can see from the way the novel has been structured. You cannot point the finger of blame at the Indians and the Indian colony at the diamond for the kind of problems that befall on the British women. That is the kind of argument that Collins puts forth in his work.

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Imperial Gothic and Women



- “the jewel - like the Koh-i-Noor given to Queen Victoria - is gifted to a woman. Women, it would seem, not only need to be protected - from colonial savages - they also need to be adorned - with colonial goods. On the one hand, home and away are kept apart (separated to prevent violence to the body of the English woman); on the other, they are conjoined, the spoils of empire literally resting on the “bosom of a woman's dress”
- (Melissa Free, 2006, p.358)



“The jewel, like the Kohinoor given to Queen Victoria, is gifted to a woman. Women, it would seem, not only need to be protected from colonial savages, but they also need to be adorned with colonial goods. On the one hand, home and away are kept to apart, separated to prevent violence

to the body of the English woman. On the other, they have conjoined the spoils of empire literally resting on the bosom of a woman's dress.’’

Historically, it is apparent that the Kohinoor was gifted to Queen Victoria. Likewise, in the novel, in this fictional universe of Collins is the Moonstone we see that Rachel is gifted that diamond, a diamond from the colony. On the one hand, there are arguments that the private in the public sphere are apart, separated, gets distinct in order to protect the woman.

On the other, the plunder of the colony is used to decorate an ornament, the woman. So there is a problematic connection between the home and away, the public and the private, the empire in terms of its *Matta polis* and its colony. So that argument is very beautifully laid out by Melissa Free.

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Imperial Crime



- “Herncastle's acquiring the gem through deception and murder establishes the pattern of repeated thefts as symbolic of "England's imperial depredations — [and the Moonstone itself as] the symbol of a national rather than a personal crime" (Reed 286).

- **Philip V. Allingham**

- <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/collins/pva30.html>



“Herncastle’s acquiring the gem through deception and murder establishes the pattern of repeated thefts as symbolic of England's Imperial depredations and the Moonstone itself as the symbol of a national rather than a personal crime.’’ We need to kind of reinforce the idea that there is not just one theft as we discussed in the previous lectures as well, there are multiple thefts, the stolen, the diamond is still one again and again.

Herncastle’s theft is one kind of plunder and then we have Franklin Blake's robbery as well. So, we cannot simply relegate this crime, this thieving to a personal crime. It is a national crime. It is a crime associated with the Empire. So that idea needs to be understood. So the crime and it is

got the attributes that we see displayed in this novel is very strongly connected to the depredations, the plunders, the robberies of the Empire.

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The British Raj and The Moonstone



- “To Collins and ultimately to his less prejudiced and more open-minded readers the British Raj is not civilising and benevolent, but economic and military imperialism at its worst. The Moonstone thus becomes a semiotic sign whose meanings lie beyond cultural misperceptions and hegemonies. In the idol, it inspires faith in the community of believers; as a useless bauble it excites the Christian sins of lust, envy, greed, and even murder.”

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Ultimately, unlike Collins and his more open-minded readers, we understand that the British Raj is not a civilizing force. Ultimately, it's not entirely about benevolent force, but it is a structure that intends to be exploitative. The British Empire is seen at its worst, narratively speaking, in Collins's *The Moonstone*, we also understand that there are meanings which go beyond cultural misperceptions and ideologies and power structures.

The idol means a lot of things to a lot of people. For the Indians and the community of believers, it inspires a lot of spiritual faith. But for the Christians it in this novel represented within this novel, it becomes a bauble and a commodity, a sign of wealth, and it inspires and provokes a lot of greed and even murder along with the range of vices

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Imperial Cautionary Tale



- “In contrast to the selflessness of the Brahmins, sensual pleasure and self-love motivate Godfrey Ablewhite as they had Colonel Herncastle, and frustrate recovery of the diamond. The colourful, exotic history of the stone which becomes its meaning both opens and closes the novel. The story of the Moonstone is a fable, a cautionary tale with an overt moral. The bulk of the novel is merely the European chapter in that history”.

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“In contrast to the selflessness of the Brahmins, sensual pleasure and self-love motivate Godfrey Ablewhite, as they had Colonel Herncastle and frustrating recovery of the diamond. The colourful, exotic history of the stone which becomes its meaning, both opens and closes the novel. The story of the Moonstone is a fable, a cautionary tale, with an overt moral, the bulk of the novel is merely the European chapter in that our history.”

The Brahmins are represented as selfless and Englishmen such as Godfrey Ablewhite, the cousin of Rachel and Colonel Herncastle, Rachel’s ancestor are represented as full of sensual pleasure, selfish, and greedy. The diamond, the gem opens and closes the narrative, it is narratively very important in structuring the plot.

Philip Allingham sees it as colourful as well as an exotic history. He also points out that the story itself is a fable. Apart from its historical context and subtext, the story of Moonstone can also be a fable a tale, which cautions the readers with an obvious message and obvious moral. What is that moral? We have been looking at that moral in various ways across these lectures. If you commit plunder, repercussions will follow. Inevitably, there is a punishment to every crime. So that seems to be the moral of this tale. Of course, there is also an imperial message to the Gothic narrative.

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Imperial Crime



- "Hercastle's acquiring the gem through deception and murder establishes the pattern of repeated thefts as symbolic of "England's imperial depredations — [and the Moonstone itself as] the symbol of a national rather than a personal crime" (Reed 286).
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“The prediction of disaster to befall each successive owner implies the gem story is one of the successive thefts. This prediction based entirely on the limitations of human nature is a curse to all but Franklin Blake and Rachel Verinder, Philip Allingham sees that Franklin Blake and Rachel Verinder seem not to be affected by the curse of the story”.

But we did see other interpretations and criticisms, which argued that they are very much implicated in that apparent curse. And we also saw how the curse in itself is not of Oriental origin. It is a curse that befalls on Rachel Verinder and implicates a lot of people in her family and extended family because of the very problematic nature of the Imperial face of Great Britain.

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Imperial Crime



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Rachel's selfless love that prompts her sacrifice, her honour for the sake of her beloved parallels the religious dedication of the Brahmins, so that the romantic love becomes the western equivalent of Eastern reverence, just as the holy men recover the diamond restore the powers of their deity. So Franklin Blake recovers Rachel's respect, lost for a time through a plausible but specious error in judgment based on seeing but not understanding.

Here Allingham offers a romantic reading of the narrative between Rachel and Franklin Blake. He is comparing Rachel Verinder to the Brahmins. Both of them are very devoted to the object of their love. The Brahmins to the diamond, so that they can recover it and restore it to it is a rightful place with a God and Rachel is similarly dedicated and selfless, because of her love for Franklin Blake.

In fact, she keeps silence for a greater part of the narrative so that she does not throw the light of suspicion on Franklin Blake. So you can see how Allingham makes a comparison between the Brahmins and Rachel's remands. So, what he is pointing out here very interestingly is that the eastern reverence is signified by the Brahmins and that has its equivalent in the romantic culture of Rachel Verinder.

Ultimately, both of them, Rachel, as well as the Brahmins, regain the object of their love, Franklin Blake also recovers the love of Rachel and all ends happily. This is a kind of reading that looks at the courtship and romantic trajectory in the novel. Of course, if you have been

following the lectures, you know that there was this Imperial narrative that characterizes the crime, the way this crime surrounding the Moonstone as a crime that emerges from the Imperial depredations of Great Britain.

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Imperial Crime



- “In *The Moonstone* Collins uses his plotline to dramatise the power of psychological and political denial as well as the importance of confession and exposure. Although the British seek to obscure their imperial crimes and vilify the Hindus, Collins reveals Blake’s complicity in his uncle’s crimes as the hero reenacts his theft of the Moonstone towards the close of the novel and finally becomes conscious of his trespass. Nonetheless, Blake’s guilt is acknowledged only partially, since he is simultaneously convicted and exonerated by the novel’s logic and its displaced representation of his imperial crime.” (Liliyan Nayder, 148)
- <http://detective.gumer.info/txt/cambridge-2.pdf>
- THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO WILKIE COLLINS EDITED BY JENNY BOURNE TAYLOR (2006)

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Now we get back onto that narrative of Imperial crime. We see that the Hindus are apparently vilified, to a great extent in the *Moonstone* by the British characters. Collins ultimately does reveal to the readers’ Franklin Blake's complicity in the crime. We know that his uncle is directly involved in the crime. But Blake is also complicit because he steals the diamond again; of course under the influence of the opium but the first time he takes the diamond we are not aware of it.

It is a mystery that is not revealed to the readers who get to see it happen again in that reenactment scene. When he does reenact it, he is teasing again, he is stealing again. Of course, that is part of an experiment, but we see that in that enactment connect to the past crimes. First

time Blake's takes it under the influence of opium and we are reminded of *Herncastle's* thieving as well.

So there is a lot of trespasses. There is a lot of crossing of thresholds which should not have been crossed. Ultimately, Blake does realize his crime what while he is convicted by the viewers, while the those who are observing that experiment realize that Blake did take it unintentionally or with the intention with the good intention of protecting Rachel. The observers exonerate him, free him of that guilt.

So there is a suggestion that the Imperial crime is also exonerated and displaced. And we know how that displacement happens through the Victorian imperialist ideology of the White Man's Burden, of the civilizing mission and so on. So we can see how the crime, the Gothic crime in this novel is very strongly framed by Imperial plunder.

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The Moonstone and the Orient



- Reviewing *The Moonstone* for the *Athenaeum* in July 1868, Geraldine Jewsbury noted that Wilkie Collins brought his readers to tears as the novel ended – not by uniting the English hero and heroine but by dividing three South Asian men. These men are Hindu priests who have together travelled to England and back, violating caste restrictions to restore a sacred Hindu diamond to its shrine in remote Kattiawar:

- (Liliyan Nayder, 139)
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The *Moonstone* was reviewed by Geraldine and Jewsbury in 1868, for the magazine, *Athenaeum* and it is very interesting to note in the review that readers have been affected by the ending of

that novel. At the end, we do not see our English hero and heroine shown us being reunited. I mean, that happens we know, but at the end, space is given to the three Hindu men who have successfully retrieved the diamond from the English and have returned back.

In fact, they had gone to a lot of trouble and suffering in order to restore this Hindu diamond to its rightful place in a shrine. This particular incident of the Hindu men being divided had apparently affected the English readers. It is a very interesting point to see that there had been empathy for these figures among the reading public. Therefore, the view that we get from within the novel about the evil nature of the Indians is not universally held by the readers. That is clear from this particular review of the Moonstone.

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Imperial Narrative



- “Few will read of the final destiny of *The Moonstone* without feeling the tears rise in their eyes as they catch the last glimpse of the three men, who have sacrificed their cast[e] in the service of their God, when the vast crowd of worshippers opens for them, as they embrace each other and separate to begin their lonely and never-ending pilgrimage of expiation. The deepest emotion is certainly reserved to the last.”
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“Few will read, this is a quotation, from the review by Geraldine and Jewsbury. Few will read the final destiny of the Moonstone without feeling the tears rise in their eyes, as they catch the last glimpse of the three men who have sacrificed the caste in the service of the God. When the vast crowd of worshipers opens for them, as they embrace each other and separate to begin the lonely and never-ending pilgrimage of expiation. The deepest emotion is certainly reserved the last.”

You can see how emotional this passage is, in terms of it is sympathy towards the three Hindu men who had lost their caste by crossing the sea in order to get the diamond back. So when they cross the sea, it is in the service of their God. So you can see the audience empathizing, with

their sufferings and sacrifices. That is what the review communicates. So three men embrace each other and they part ways in order to go on a pilgrimage of expiation, in order to do penance for what they did for the act of crossing the sea.

So you can use that this is very poignant, this separation of the Hindu priests, their loneliness, their never-ending pilgrimage, their constant religious travels is sympathized with by the audience and the comment that the deepest emotion is certainly reserved to the last. This is the deepest emotion that is being prompted in the reader that separation of the Hindu men.

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Imperial Narrative



- Although critics often identify sentimentality as politically evasive, the sympathy that Collins evokes for the Hindus here is politically charged. In a novel published on the tenth anniversary of the rebellion that Victorians termed the ‘Indian Mutiny’ – an uprising that generated racial hatred towards South Asians among the British – Collins humanises figures commonly represented as bestial by his contemporaries and identifies as their rightful property a valuable diamond looted by British forces in Seringapatam fifty years before the main action of his story is set.
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“Liliyan Nayder points out that although critics often identify sentimentality as politically evasive, the sympathy that Collins evokes for the Hindus here is politically charged, in a novel published on the 10th anniversary of the rebellion that Victorians termed the Indian Mutiny and uprising that generated racial hatred towards South Asians among the British. -Collins humanizes figures commonly represented as bestial by his contemporaries and identifies as their rightful property looted by British forces in Seringapatam, 50 years before the main action of her story is set.”

Liliyan Nayder acknowledges that sentimentality is perceived as politically digressive. There is an evasion there in excess of sentimentality. Putting that aside, we did see sentimentality in that review of Geraldine Jewsbury. Despite that, Liliyan Nayder argues that there is a political subtext to the sympathy evoked in the British readers, upon seeing the sacrifices of the Hindu

men and the way they part ways to go on pilgrimages. This particular novel was the Moonstone was published on the 10th anniversary of the Indian, the first Indian war of independence that the British called Indian Mutiny.

That particular act of resistance on the part of Indians was particularly seen with a lot of hatred by the British. In fact, it provoked a lot of hatred towards Indians and South Asians on the part of the English and the British. What is significant to us is that Collins humanizes these Indian figures, the Hindu men who travelled to England to retrieve their rightful property.

And what is interesting again to note is that the diamond is seen as the rightful property of the Indians by the Moonstone narrative. The diamond was looted by British forces in the fall of Seringapatam 50 years ago, in terms of the novel's main action, even though that diamond is plundered by the British, that property is not seen as the rightful property of the Empire by Collins in Moonstone.

In fact, it is seen as the rightful property of the Indians. This kind of argument that you see in the Moonstone is particularly interesting, given the politically charged climate of the 19th century. The past does come back to haunt the present in this Gothic narrative of the Moonstone. Collins also redresses the crimes done in the past, through the Gothic narrative that he sets up in the present.

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Imperial Crime



- "Depicting the 1799 Siege of Seringapatam in his Prologue, Collins prefaces *The Moonstone* with an instance of British violence against Indians and suggests that their later acts of violence against Britons are marks of retribution triggered by an original, imperial crime."
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Who ultimately becomes the Gothic villains in the story, not the Hindu men, but the English noblemen such as Herncastle. The British Empire represent the evil that they committed in the past and the retributions performed by the colonized becomes emblems of retribution and revenge, forced to perform by the colonized.

So the Imperial crime is the original crime. The Gothic crime is the original crime by the Empire. The rest are in response to that Imperial crime. What becomes extremely significant is that Collins turns the assumptions of the Gothic on its head. There is this perception that the colony is Gothic. Collins tweaks that perception by saying that the colony becomes Gothic in the *Moonstone*, particularly because of the Imperial crime of Great Britain. So the finger of blame is pointed not at the men and women who are inhabitants of the colony but at the men who inhabit the metropolis in the Imperial context.

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Victorian Authors and the Orient



- “Nineteenth century Britain witnessed an increased interest with the Orient, largely as a result of the imperial expansion that reached its peak during that time. India was one of the main Oriental interests of the Victorians because of the political, commercial, religious and scientific passion of the nineteenth century people in India. For that reason, various Victorian authors who wrote about India were mostly characterized as being orientalist and writing in a biased way. One such example of this was Joseph Rudyard Kipling.”
- **Depicting the Orient in Wilkie Collins’ *The Moonstone*** by *Amna Matar Al-Neyadi*
- <https://www.journals.aiac.org.au/index.php/IJALEL/article/view/1794>

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about India were mostly characterized as being orientalist and writing in a biased way. One such example of this was Joseph Rudyard Kipling.”

Across other lectures for this course, we have seen how the 19th century was a period in which there was a lot of attention on the Orient on the east and India was one of the important nations of the Orient. There was a lot of interest in India because of its wealth and its commercial nodes. There was a lot of interest in India's discoveries across a range of domains.

However, we see in many of the authors from the Victorian period that there is a biased way of approaching the Indian culture and the Indian landscape and Rudyard Kipling is also perceived by a lot of critics as being very biased. However, when you read works such as Collins's *The Moonstone*, we can also see how there were other writers from the same period who criticized Britain directly and indirectly, for the various Imperial crimes that Britain performed against its colonies, so the Imperial depredations were fictionalized and Great Britain was taken to task for its attitude towards its colonies.

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Collins and the Orient



- “This, as Edward Said explains, was because nineteenth century writers were aware of the empire’s authority. ...
- Wilkie Collins tended to have a positive attitude towards the Orient in his novel *The Moonstone* and towards the Brahmins specifically...”
- **Depicting the Orient in Wilkie Collins’ *The Moonstone*** by Amna Matar Al-Neyadi
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“Edward Said points out that the biased perceptions of many of the Victorian authors were because nineteenth-century writers were aware of the Empire's authority.” The bias writers, prejudice writers were taken in by the immense power of Great Britain. There was nothing that could check the might of Great Britain than when Britain was at was at its Imperial height.

However, even during those times, there were writings by figures such as Wilkie Collins who projected a more positive attitude towards the Orient in his novel *The Moonstone* and towards the Brahmin specifically in this particular novel. In fact, we saw how, how the novel's moral centre which is in Rachel Verinder for the European audience.

In fact, her courtship, her romance, her love, her selflessness is compared to the dedication and the reverence of the eastern thinkers. So, you can see how the moral compass for the readers rests not with the English men but with the Hindu priests, the Brahmins and with Rachel Verinder. This is an exciting novel where multiple sub-genres collide.

In the initial lectures, I discussed how this novel was seen as a landmark detective fiction and we also saw, how jostling cheek by jowl alongside this sub-genre of the Gothic. There was also this Gothic sub-genre in this particular novel in how the crime was not just personal crime. It is a crime that connected the nation to its colonies so that it becomes an imperial crime.

And we also discussed how the attributes of the Gothic were displaced on to Indian figures. And ultimately we see how the Gothic is turned on its head with the Gothic villains being not these Indian figures, but these Imperial plunderers. Thank you for watching. I will continue in the next session.