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# Degeneration and the Disease Motif in Leonard Woolf's *Pearls and Swine* and Jack London's *Good-by, Jack*

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*"The exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power"*

*(Foucault 171)*

Disease and disorder appear as regular motifs in colonial writing during the literary modernist period. In the hands of Western modernist writers, the disease motif becomes intensely symbolic, illustrating critiques of the imperial project. This essay considers the use of disease as a metaphor for European decline in two short stories, Jack London's *Good-by, Jack* and Leonard Woolf's *Pearls and Swine*, and its role in the modernist critique of imperialism as a morally contaminating endeavour. The anti-imperialist argument in both texts is twofold—one against the more apparent bodily and economic harm inflicted on colonised peoples, and the second against the degeneration of the coloniser. Unlike most moral and economic counterarguments to imperialism, however, Woolf's and London's discourses position colonies themselves as polluting, wherein disease symbolises an erosion of Western culture and consciousness. Both texts also eulogise the native's body and employ the Noble Savage trope only to emphasise the native's 'debasement' and present a contrast between the native's 'natural' state and the coloniser's degeneration. Associating colonial subjects with uncleanliness creates an "Other", which, as Edward Said argues, is crucial for the identification of the European Self. David Spurr's analysis of debasement in imperialist rhetoric and Hayden White's examination of the Wild Man myth serve as useful additions to this discussion for their exploration of discursive modes of depicting an unfamiliar that may then be situated in the modernist context (46). As this essay will discuss further, the form of discourse in these two texts, though broadly critical of imperialism, is still rooted in Foucauldian notions of power and knowledge, perpetuating the notion of the colonised as Europe's Other.

Colonial discourse is rife with binary categorisations furthering the gap between coloniser and colonised. In his landmark polemic *Orientalism*, Said's view of such binaries as aiming to "polarise the distinction" between Westerner and Oriental, or pure and polluted, is helpful in understanding them as deliberate political choices in literature (Said 46). He takes

this notion a step further by describing Europe's representation of the East as a "sort of surrogate and even underground self" (Said 4). Therefore, the juxtaposition of white characters and natives in both texts is clearly a deliberate exhibition of how European identity has an irreconcilable opposition to that of the 'native.' However, *Orientalism* is limited in two ways: the first is its singular focus on East-West relations, though Said's descriptions of representing the Other are also applicable to the chosen texts; secondly, in Said's analysis, the colonial Self and Other are two carefully constructed opposites, but both Woolf and London express an anxiety about the Self's degeneration into an unrecognisable, corrupted state that contradicts this distinction. Julia Kristeva refers to this as 'abjection', a state of being "neither subject nor object", whereby the Self degenerates into an unrecognisable Other (Kristeva and Toril 238). Disease, then, is the perfect metaphor for this transformation in colonial writing, reflecting Kristeva's association of abjection with "nausea, distaste, horror" (Kristeva and Toril 238). The "inconceivably monstrous" sight of lepers in London's narrative epitomises this idea, as does the nauseating "smell of dead oysters" permeating Woolf's pearl fishery (London 118; Woolf 45). The theme of social degeneration runs through both Woolf's and London's stories, and their overarching fear is of the final point of this process—abjection.

The purpose of the disease motif in modernist colonial texts is, firstly, to identify the colonised Other and perpetuate their alienness. Susan Sontag, examining the historical uses of illness metaphors, corroborates this, observing that diseases whose "causality is murky" have historically been "awash in significance" (58). She argues that writers have found it 'plausible to compare civil disorder to an illness, just as a "polis to an organism", which links back to modernist writers' second use of the disease motif—as moralised symbolism for the degeneration of Europeans in colonial contexts (Sontag 76). I will initially discuss the first objective: an "active instrument of construction, order, and arrangement" (Spurr 15). Spurr notes three reasons for scrutinising the native body, two of which are expressed in Woolf's

and London's narratives: "its aesthetic value" and "its ethical value" (Spurr 22). I will discuss the second in greater detail later in this essay, alongside the Noble Savage trope. Aesthetically, Woolf establishes the native's filth when observing "Tamils' squat black figures" and "Arabs in the long dirt night-shirts" (55). Synecdochic reductions of them to "shadows", "hoarse voices", and "swaying struggling forms" depict people predisposed to labour, and though Woolf glorifies this and their "dignified" conduct with his laudatory tone, their dehumanisation and perceived unsanitary existence normalises their contamination (Woolf 54-56). They are presumably predisposed to "die of plague or cholera, like flies", a simile emphasising their multitude rather than individual agency (Woolf 43). Thus, the polluting environment of "plague and cholera", hyperbolically intensified by maggots and "flies, too, millions, billions of them", becomes a threat to Robson's body and character (Woolf 43). London's aestheticization of Hawaiians has the opposite effect; he states that their "flesh is golden", placing them in a pre-colonial, uncorrupted state (112). Lucy Monukui is depicted with "magnificent" features, "just beginning to show the amplitude of the women of her race", making her the idealised symbol of all Hawaiians (London 117). The symbol of Lucy Monukui, similar to Woolf's symbol of White as the fallen European, exhibits the modernist "dependence on symbolism", particularly in the modernist short story (Head 7). The supposedly objective visual representation of human bodies allows not only complete control over represented colonial subjects, but also the projection of disease onto them; borrowing from Said's analysis, the writers "contain" their subjects, "speaking on [their] behalf" (Said 20). Thus, the motif aids in their critique of imperialism by invoking the reader's horror, but this critique is suffused with the implicit power relations perpetuated when the colonial subject is deprived of voice and the capacity to produce knowledge.

Both Said's and Spurr's critiques of colonial discourse are informed by Foucault's concept of hierarchical observation, "an apparatus in which the techniques that make it

possible to see induce effects of power" (Foucault 171). The discursive power held by Woolf and London stems from their ability to write the disease onto the native's body, to contaminate it themselves as authors. This Foucauldian relationship complicates the texts' critiques and perpetuates imperialist power structures in their representations of disease. In their observation of the diseased native body, Woolf and London sustain a hierarchy where the pollutant non-European lies at the bottom, which privileges them in turn with the ability to define and categorise, corresponding with Foucault's claim that, at a certain level, "the formation of knowledge and the increase of power regularly reinforce one another in a circular process" (Foucault 224). With such power relations underlying their narratives, the language and imagery that Woolf and London employ imbue their colonial contexts with a polluting quality capable of disintegrating the European Self.

Disease is closely tied to a sense of moral decline, as Sontag notes, stating that a disease becomes "adjectival" and "morally, if not literally, contagious" when given significance (58). In modernist literature, the motif facilitates the critique of imperialism by considering its threat to the moral strength of the Western character. Independently, it presupposes the immorality of the non-Western. Spurr argues that colonial discourse must identify an "object of debasement" that "supplies the negative end of a system of value" (77). His analysis is useful because it borrows from several concepts relevant to this discussion, such as Kristeva's notion of abjection, Foucauldian power relations, and Hayden White's examination of the Wild Man myth, giving it a particularly holistic view of colonial discourse. Returning to the disease motif, Woolf and London both view disease among native populations as resulting from the imperial project, be it through introduction from abroad in *Good-by, Jack* or administrative apathy in *Pearls and Swine*. However, in their representations, natives are consigned to this fate, and set up as helplessly pathogenic to the Westerner. Usefully taking leprosy as an example, Sontag claims that "epidemic disease" becomes an apt metaphor for

"social disorder", which both writers attach to non-European societies through their depictions of disease (58). Though the maladies both psychological and physical in either text are seen as an outcome of the colonial encounter, the writers' overwhelming attention to Jack Kersdale and the planter White reflects a primary concern for the American and European, and the implication that if colonialism is morally impermissible, it is so mainly for its adverse consequences for the colonisers themselves.

Having looked at the shaping of colonies as crucibles for contamination, it would be helpful to examine the idealisation of the native that precedes it in both stories. Hayden White describes the Noble Savage trope, used in both Woolf's and London's narratives, as a representation of "all that was admirable and uncorrupted in human nature" (150). In their characterisation of the Other, modernist colonial writers rely on this trope as a foil for the critique of the abject coloniser. The unfamiliarity of the 'Wild Man' allows for "ostensive self-definition through negation" (White 152). The dead Arab in *Pearls and Swine* appears soon after the planter White's own demise in the story, and the former's "very calm, very dignified" appearance is juxtaposed with the "horror of [White's] face" to contrast the transformation of the corrupted European with the natural, helpless state in which South Asian natives appear to exist (Woolf 56). The trope cuts both ways—in describing natives as "calm, impassive, stern", Woolf relegates them to a passive acceptance of their contamination (Woolf 55). Unlike London, however, Woolf does not assume the natural cleanliness of the native body, as has been discussed earlier in this essay, despite their perceived vigour and dignity. In using a Conradian frame narrative, in fact, he distances the contagious East from the safe haven of Torquay, and also reflects the modernist "concern with subjective experience in his narration (Howarth 158). London's narrator employs mythological metaphors of "sun-ripe Junos" and "bronzed Apollos" for native Hawaiians to present them as an ideal of health and beauty that Western readers are familiar with (London 112). He also

presupposes Lucy Monukui's descent "from old chief stock" to mark her as a "pure Polynesian" (117). She is the "epitome of all Polynesian charms", juxtaposed with the other "unhappy wretches" (London 118). The Noble Savage complements the colonial gaze, giving the aestheticization of the native body a moral meaning that seemingly redeems non-Europeans. In this way, the idealised body of the Noble Savage becomes a site of infection in modernist writing.

In their critique of colonialism, modernist writers redirect the effects of the disease motif from natives onto their European characters. London portrays missionaries strayed from their "lofty purpose" of civilising the kanaka, and the metaphorical alternative is Jack Kersdale, but his possible contraction of leprosy leaves no model of the imperial project viable (111). Woolf's commissioner similarly employs an acerbic tone against the "insanitary" conditions and "unscientific" practices tolerated by the colonial administration in his pearl fishery (Woolf 44). Like London, Woolf accepts no model of the imperial project; his commissioner scoffs at the Archdeacon's theoretical assumptions about the colonial periphery, yet the alternative—raw experience—brings with it the debilitating effect of degeneration, with White as its "raving, writhing" image (53). While Woolf restricts his metaphor to the physical expressions of a cultural decline, London goes a step further in portraying the "phantom horrors of [White's] madness" to explore both the physical and psychological transformation of the abject coloniser (54). As Rod Edmond notes, London's story reflects a "sexualization of leprosy that projects "deep anxieties" (79). The connotation of sexual intercourse between Lucy Monokui and Kersdale makes his contraction of leprosy a moral issue. His cultural vagrancy and sexual trespasses doom him from the beginning to leprosy, and he is 'punished' for his immorality, reflecting "principles of exclusion, boundary, and difference which enter into the debasement of the primitive" (Spurr 82). Edmond also argues that, as a disease, leprosy offered a "powerful cluster of images" for colonial writers to criticise

imperialism while also denigrating the native's morality, ultimately favouring separation and distinction over reconciliation (79). In both texts, the reader may associate conventional images of death, hardship, and disease, visible in both native and European, with a sense of moral transgression and may identify this as a direct result of imperialist greed.

Modernist writers' depiction of abject Europeans are rooted in a "progressively despatialised" notion of the Noble Savage (White 153). As Hayden White argues, the increased European presence in previously 'wild', unfamiliar contexts demands "remythification", which he describes as the Self's "interiorisation" of an uncivilised Other, rather than its projection onto a foreign space (154). Nelson-McDermott corresponds with his argument, referring to the DT in *Pearls and Swine* as "an external expression of [the planter] White's internal evil" (203). Hayden White's analysis of wildness in modernity as reduced to the "individual's psychological landscape", however, is only partially true (179). While the fates of Jack Kersdale and the planter White interrogate the savagery subdued in the coloniser's own self, the descriptions of disease-stricken natives in both texts proves that modernist writing does not seem to depart from their necessity for a colonised Other, instead using the Noble Savage trope as a counterweight to the degeneration and metaphorical disease brought by Western entanglement in colonies. Here, savagery itself becomes a transmissible disease for both writers, a by-product of an imperialist paradigm that no longer bolsters Western civilisation but threatens to erode it.

*Good-by, Jack* and *Pearls and Swine* are situated in intensely moral universes, and the appearance of the disease motif in them creates complex levels of meaning, all of which pertain to colonialism and its power structures. Disease is only the physical representation of a greater phenomenon of degradation and decline that modern colonial writers anticipate and fear (Spurr 76). Sontag comes to mind again when critiquing the use of this motif, as she makes the case to think of disease as physical phenomena rather than metaphors (3). Both

Woolf and London show that, in the context of modernist colonial discourse, disease as a moral framework serves as an exercise of Foucauldian power over colonial contexts, and conveys a sense of natives as polluting agents when used to signify abjection in Westerners. Colonial writers adopt the characteristics of modernism such as subjective narration, symbolism, and primitivism to achieve their representations of colonial contexts and subjects as agents of contamination, from which the West must protect itself. In moving beyond the use of disease as metaphor for degeneration, critical focus may turn away from a preoccupation with the West to other anti-imperialist arguments that focus on the colonised themselves and their experiences of disease that were exacerbated by the colonial encounter. In both stories, disease serves as a double-sided framework, imperfectly critiquing the morality of imperialist ideology while creating a moral distinction between the pure Westerner and the contaminating Other.

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