

(Dec Issue Cyber Online Article No. 25)

## The Man Alone in British Colonial and Scientific Romance 1886-1904

Nagesh Nalawade  
New College, Kolhapur

This paper uses some of the key texts of the ‘romance revival’ of the late nineteenth century to develop a theory of the Man Alone, and to explain its significance in both literary and cultural terms. A historicist approach is used to counter a tendency amongst critics to overlook some of the more commercially successful texts of the period in favour of their less ‘popular’ but more ostensibly ‘artistic’ fin-de-siecle or early modernist contemporaries. The paper is centered on an analysis of novels by four of the most influential authors of the period – Conrad, Kipling, Stevenson and Wells – as well as a selection of their essays and short stories. This was accompanied by a period of archival research studying the original publication context of the source material, and also contemporary press coverage of some of the issues raised. It was discovered that the Man Alone fulfilled two functions in romance fiction, notably in examining the destabilisation of traditional assertions of identity that resulted from Britain’s imperial experiences, and also in dramatising the shift from theology to science as the authorising discourse of British society that happened in the wake of the publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*. The Man Alone can thus be argued to be critical to the popular interpretation of the major political and philosophical shifts of late nineteenth century society. The romance revival itself, therefore, should be read as having played a formative role in the emergence of a Modernist literary culture, with Stevenson, Kipling and Wells playing significant roles alongside Conrad in this process.

Four months after its first publication in April 1719, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* was on its fourth edition, having sold over 80,000 copies and caused a publishing sensation. The book was the first popular romance of the Man Alone in the life of the newly formed Kingdom of Great Britain; shipwrecked and seemingly destitute, yet blessed with a self-sufficiency that enabled him to survive and triumph.<sup>1</sup> By 1912 James Joyce was able to identify *Crusoe* as "the true prototype of the British colonist,"

From John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) onward, the literary culture of the putative, protestant British state used the Man Alone as a means of testing and validating – and, in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), satirising – its metaphysical identity and the moral authority of its growing political dominance.<sup>2</sup> The biblical archetype for this kind of inquiry was Christ's exile in the wilderness, and the challenge to resist external influences and temptations to retain control over an integral identity is a constant theme of texts featuring the Man Alone figure. The literary form that drew most extensively from the story of Christ's exile was the medieval romance, in which the questing hero was abstracted from his social context and put through a series of trials to exemplify the community of which he was a part.<sup>3</sup> It is significant, therefore, that the closing decades of the nineteenth century witnessed what was identified as the 'revival of romance,' which can be seen as a reaction against the narratives of social realism that had dominated the middle part of the century.

The period studied by this paper begins with the publication of Robert Louis

Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* in 1886 and concludes with Wells's short story *The Country of the Blind* in 1904.<sup>5</sup> The intervening years encompassed not only the high point in sales terms of the romance revival (Daly 20-24), but also that of British imperialism, the precariousness of which will be discussed in section 2. As well as containing some of the most significant texts of the romance revival, this period was also influenced by the fate and growing legend of a historical model of the Man Alone who serves as a useful introduction to some of the tensions that will be explored.

The discussion that follows will take as its central figure the man who has either jumped from or been left behind by the good ship Empire. By the end of the nineteenth century the colonial romance had constructed Empire as a space in which the Victorian British gentleman could demonstrate his physical and cultural dominance over a series of ethnic, sexual and geographical others.<sup>9</sup> Newspaper accounts of British imperial expeditions in the second half of the nineteenth century helped to popularize this view, with heroes such as Wolseley, Gordon, and Kitchener doing battle with an exotic cast of Dervishes, Zulus and Fuzzy Wuzzies, before returning home to great popular acclaim.

The British Empire, however, was leading something of a double life in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The so called 'Scramble for Africa' was well underway, with rival European powers asserting territorial claims over large swathes of the continent and subjecting them to varying degrees of political and military control, in contrast to the more ad hoc Imperialism of the first half of the century. New territories were thus being acquired at an unprecedented rate, with

men like Cecil Rhodes demonstrating the possibilities for the lone adventurer to acquire both wealth and political influence in the process.

The professional and scientific world of qualifications that is inhabited by Lanyon, Jekyll and Utterson thus functions to conceal, rather than reveal, truth. The truth is locked away in sealed envelopes placed in safes to be opened only by specific people at specific times, after any chance for others to act upon it or condition it has passed. Knowledge, the end point and goal of scientific study, is thus the preserve of an ordained few - it is religion with different titles. Experimentation on the self within this world will, therefore, never reveal any meaningful truths due to the lack of a social context in which they can be realised.

The philosopher John Dewey, in his essay “The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy,” explored the processes of epistemology in the wake of evolutionary theory, evaluating the function of the evidence of individual human sense perception in the age of Science. On the Origin of Species and The Principles of Geology had done much to effect the questioning of the relationship between the creation and the purpose of existence, but science had also begun to examine the mechanisms responsible for the causal relationship between biological and ontological identity.

Gregor Mendel’s paper “Experiments in Plant Hybridization,” often seen as the starting point of the science of genetics, was originally published in 1866, yet met with criticism rather than support, and apathy more than either. It was not until the early twentieth century that the rediscovery of Mendel’s work into the biological mechanisms that drive the principles of heredity was recognised as the breakthrough that evolutionists had been looking for since the days of Darwin’s

pangenesis hypothesis. Particularly crucial to Mendel's work was his observation of the existence and function of 'dominant' and 'recessive' genes, which explained how organisms were able to pass on characteristics that they themselves do not outwardly display. The Man Alone, following the genetic model, is thus fundamentally a composite being, within which competing elements create the terms of their unity within an ever dynamic struggle that must remain unresolved.

It has been the intention of this paper to demonstrate the existence and significance of the figure of the Man Alone within the romance revival of the late nineteenth century. The popularity of these works suggests a need amongst their audience for an identification with a lone, autonomous hero, perhaps because of the increasingly crowded and regulated society that Britain was becoming. For the authors studied, however, the Man Alone became a device for critiquing such desires for autonomy and unilateralism of personal action born out of the perceived disempowerment of the individual within industrial modernity. The seemingly inevitable final disintegration of the Man Alone in the texts studied demonstrates the consequences of ultimately failing to engage with social reality, of an individual refusing to forge a community, however artificial and restrictive of personal liberty that process may be.

That man was alone, isolated from God by the scientific advances of the age, and from traditional sources of community by the political, social and geographical upheavals of the industrial, imperial age was not disputed. The question of "how to be" in the face of this conclusion, however, was one that the authors studied engaged with through their exploration of the causes and consequences of isolation

in the Man Alone. The importance of the Man Alone can thus be summarised by use of a particularly Victorian metaphor. Through its role in dramatising and making accessible to a mass readership a means to interpret the significant cultural shifts occurring in philosophical and political conceptions of personal responsibility and the role of community, the Man Alone served as the governor on the steam engine of Victorian ontology, providing a safety valve to resolve some of the revolutionary pressures building up in the post-Darwin, industrial world.

### **Works Cited**

- Ambrosini, Richard and Richard Dury. Introduction. Robert Louis Stevenson: Writer of Boundaries. Eds. Richard Ambrosini and Richard Dury. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006. xiii-xxviii.
- Anonymous. Rev. of Lord Jim, by Joseph Conrad. Pall Mall Gazette 71 (1900): 4.
- Arata, Stephen. Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin-de-Siecle. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.
- Asher, Michael. Khartoum: The Ultimate Imperial Adventure. London: Penguin, 2005.
- Attwood, Margaret. Introduction. The Island of Doctor Moreau. By H.G. Wells. London: Penguin, 2005. xiii-xxvii.
- Augustine of Hippo. The Literal Meaning of Genesis. Trans. John Hammond Taylor. Vol. 1. New York: Newman Press, 1982.
- “Babu.” Oxford English Dictionary Online. 2007. Oxford University Press. 15th

August 2007 <<http://dictionary.oed.com>>.

Bartrip, Peter. *Themselves Writ Large: The British Medical Association 1832-1966*.

London: BMJ, 1996.

Batchelor, John. *Lord Jim*. London: Unwin Hyman, 1988.

Bateson, William. *Mendel's Principles of Heredity, a Defense*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1902.

Bergonzi, Bernard. *The Early H.G. Wells: A Study of The Scientific Romances*.

Manchester: Manchester UP, 1961.

Best, Steven and Douglas Kellner, "H.G. Wells, Biotechnology, and Genetic Engineering: A Dystopic Vision." *UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies*. 11th May 2007. UCLA. 20th May 2007 <<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/essays.html>>.

Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.

Bloom, Harold. *Ringers in the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971.

Blum, Harold F. "The Importance of the Individual in Human Evolution." *The Scientific Monthly* 67 (1948): 115-118.

Bond, Brian. "Maurice, Sir John Frederick (1841-1912)." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. 2007. Oxford University Press. 15th August 2007 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com>>.

Bongie, Chris. *Exotic Memories: Literature, Colonialism, and the Fin de Siecle*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1991.

Borello, Alfred. *H.G. Wells: Author in Agony*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois

University Press, 1972.

Bowler, Peter J. "The Changing Meaning of 'Evolution.'" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36 (1975): 95-114.

Carabine, Keith, ed. *Joseph Conrad: Critical Assessments*. Vol. 1. London: Helm Information, 1992.

Chapple, John A. V. *Science and Literature in the Nineteenth Century*. London: Macmillan, 1986.

Chaudhuri, Nirad C. *The Continent of Circe: Being an Essay on the Peoples of India*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1965.

Christensen, Timothy. "The 'Bestial Mark' of Race in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*." *Criticism* 46 (2004): 575-595.

Colvin, Sidney, ed. *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*. Vol. 2. London: Methuen, 1911.

Conrad, Joseph. *Lord Jim: an Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Sources, Essays in Criticism*. Ed. Thomas C. Moser. New York: Norton, 1996.

---. "Books." *Notes on Life and Letters*. London: Dent, 1949.

Crossley, Roger. *H.G. Wells. Stormont Reader's Guide Number 19*. Washington: Stormont House, 1986.

Daly, Nicholas. *Modernism, Romance and the fin de siècle: Popular Fiction and British Culture, 1880–1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999.

Davenport-Hines, Richard. "Gordon, Charles George (1833-1885)." *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Vol. 22. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004.

864-870.

