

THE IMPERIAL GOTHIC: The British novel, 1880-1914

Main Characteristics of the Imperial Gothic:

-- Blends Adventure with Gothic elements

-- Combines a seemingly scientific and progressive, often Darwinian ideology of imperialism with an antithetical interest in the occult

-- Typically, British characters find themselves in various bizarre, unusual locations in the far reaches of the empire where they have mysterious, terrifying experiences that frequently involves "going native" or descending into the primitive; sometimes occult phenomena follow characters from colonized settings home to Britain

[Notice how invasion-scare stories like *War of the Worlds* and *Dracula* reverse the outward movement of imperialist expansion; Count Dracula is "the final aristocrat," the last of a "conquering race," who threatens to create a demonic empire of the dead from the living British Empire, and whose thinking links racism to the mixing of races, pride in pure blood to blood-sucking cannibalism, aristocratic descent to witchcraft -- all of which reads like a parody of the "conquering race" rhetoric common in imperialistic writing and a premonition of fascism]

-- Use of the sexualized/eroticized colonized female body to mediate racial, cultural, political, social relations between men

-- In contrast to Britain/Europe, seen as the space of the rational and the knowable, where religion has lost its hold, the colonized space emerges as the site of the occult and the irrational, replete with strange gods and unspeakable rites; this represents the flip side of "the spiritual Orient," embraced by many Europeans during this same period; but unlike the spiritual Orient, the Imperial Gothic does not offer salvationist answers for seekers of religious truth; what the Imperial Gothic offers instead are images of decline and fall, of civilization turning into savagery

-- Expresses intense, but displaced, engagement with political and social problems; reflects anxieties about the weakening of imperial power precisely when the empire was at its climax.

MAIN THEMES IN IMPERIAL GOTHIC

1. regression to barbarism or "going native"
2. invasion of civilization by savage or demonic forces
3. diminution of opportunities for (manly) adventure and heroism

[Note: British imperialism did not rest on a simple assertion of racial supremacy, but was founded on an assertion of cultural, civilizational, and moral superiority; the phenomenon of "going native" thus illustrates a non-biological, cultural, hence porous or permeable understanding of race]

Major practitioners of Imperial Gothic

Rudyard Kipling
Joseph Conrad
Rider Haggard
John Buchan
R.L. Stevenson

RUDYARD KIPLING (1865-1936)

- Born in India (then part of the British empire) and spent early childhood there
- Sent off to England to be educated in a boarding school; hates the experience
- Returns to India as a young man to take up a job as a newspaper reporter
- A prolific writer of novels, short stories and poems for adults as well as children; first major writer to write about lower class characters including petty soldiers in the British army.
- Criticized for espousing a crude jingoistic form of imperialism; possibly a symptom of underlying anxieties about his own cultural hybridity

Best known works include

The Jungle Book
Gunga Din
Kim
The Man Who Would be King
The Recessional

Famous Quotes:

- "the white man's burden"
- "the great game"

■ “East is East and West is West/And never the twain shall meet”

Kipling's Imperial Gothic: his tales are typically about white men who get caught up in strange situations in which they feel vulnerable to or persecuted by Indian men over whom they are authorized to exercise power. The Indian woman often serves as the obligatory medium through which male anxieties over racial/sexual identity, status and power are expressed.