

Imperial Gothic

Brantlinger, Patrick. *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988.

Imperialism and occultism both functioned as ersatz religions, but their fusion in imperial Gothic represents something different from a search for new faiths. The patterns of atavism and going native described by imperialist romancers do not offer salvationist answers for seekers after religious truth; they offer instead insistent images of decline and fall or of civilization turning into its opposite just as the Englishman who desecrates a Hindu temple in Kipling's "Mark of the Beast" turns into a werewolf. Imperial Gothic expresses anxieties about the waning of religious orthodoxy, but even more clearly it expresses anxieties about the ease with which civilization can revert to barbarism or savagery and thus about the weakening of Britain's imperial hegemony. The atavistic descents into the primitive experienced by fictional characters seem often to be allegories of the larger regressive movement of civilization, British progress transformed into British backsliding. So the first section of Richard Jefferies's apocalyptic fantasy *After London* (1885) is entitled "The Relapse into Barbarism". Similarly, the narrator of Erskine Childers's spy novel *Riddle of the Sands* (1903) starts his tale in this way: "I have read of men who, when forced by their calling to live for long periods in utter solitude – save for a few black faces – have made it a rule to dress regularly for dinner in order to... prevent a relapse into barbarism". Much imperialist writing after about 1880 treats the Empire as a barricade against a new barbarian invasion; just as often it treats the Empire as a "dressing for dinner", a temporary means of preventing Britain itself from relapsing into barbarism.

After the mid-Victorian years the British found it increasingly difficult to think of themselves as inevitably progressive; they began worrying instead about the degeneration of their institutions, their culture, their racial "stock". [...] The aesthetic and decadent movements offer sinister analogies to Roman imperial decline and fall, while realistic novelists – George Gissing and Thomas Hardy, for instance – paint gloomy pictures of contemporary society and "the ache of modernism" (some of Gissing's pictures are explicitly anti-imperialist). Apocalyptic themes and images are characteristic of imperial Gothic, in which, despite the consciously pro-Empire values of many authors, the feeling emerges that "we are those upon whom the ends of the world are come".

The three principal themes of imperial Gothic are individual regression or going native; an invasion of civilization by the forces of barbarism or demonism; and the diminution of opportunities for adventure and heroism in the modern world. In the romances of Stevenson, Haggard, Kipling, Doyle, Bram Stoker, and John Buchan the supernatural or paranormal, usually symptomatic of individual regression, often manifests itself in imperial settings. Noting that Anglo-Indian fiction frequently deals with "inexplicable curses, demonic possession, and ghostly visitations," Lewis Wurgaft cites Kipling's

“Phantom Rickshaw” as typical, and countless such tales were set in Burma, Egypt, Nigeria, and other parts of the Empire as well. In Edgar Wallace's *Sanders of the River* (1909), for example, the commissioner of a West African territory out-savages the savages, partly through police brutality but partly also through his knowledge of witchcraft. [...]

In numerous late Victorian and Edwardian stories, moreover, occult phenomena follow characters from imperial settings home to Britain. In Doyle's “The Brown Hand” (1899), an Anglo-Indian doctor is haunted after his return to England by the ghost of an Afghan whose hand he had amputated. In “The Ring of Thoth” (1890) and “Lot No. 249” (1892), Egyptian mummies come to life in the Louvre and in the rooms of an Oxford student. In all three stories, western science discovers or triggers supernatural effects associated with the “mysterious Orient”. My favorite story of this type is H.G. Wells's “The Truth about Pyecraft”, in which an obese Londoner takes an Indian recipe for “loss of weight” but instead of slimming down, begins levitating. The problem caused by oriental magic is then solved by western technology: lead underwear, which allows the balloonlike Mr. Pyecraft to live almost normally, feet on the ground.