

Loneliness: exposing the myth of the stoic Sahib in colonialist-era literature

Peter Turberfield

At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries the British Empire was at the height of its power. As a form of self-justification the Empire's civilising influence was stressed, and its lonely administrators, isolated in far-flung corners of the world were consequently portrayed as paragons of self-sacrifice, devoting their lives to the betterment of grateful natives. This image was propagated through the medium of popular adventure fiction, especially aimed at boys, creating pride and a desire to become a part of the great philanthropic enterprise in the hearts and imaginations of successive generations of young readers. As Elaine Showalter says in *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*, writers of this kind of fiction involving men in colonial settings were basically writing for boys, and were thus seen to be forming the attitudes necessary for future rulers of the Empire: 'boy's fiction was the primer of empire. Little boys who read will become big boys who rule, and adventure fiction is thus important training' (Showalter: 80).¹⁾ She quotes the nineteenth-century critic Edward Salmon: "Boys' literature of a sound kind ought to build up men . . . In choosing the books that boys shall read it is necessary to remember that we are choosing mental food for the future chiefs of a great race."²⁾ The image so created was such a powerful one, and became so firmly rooted in popular imagination, that it could only really be unravelled through the same medium. This paper will look at the creation of

the image of the noble Empire-builder, and then look at the way in which three writers deliberately undermined it. They all explore the theme of the devastating effects of loneliness on supposedly stoic ‘Sahibs’, isolated from their own kind in often frightening and bewilderingly incomprehensible surroundings. This implicit criticism of the institutionalised belief in the Empire and Britain’s benevolent world-role, was a small but significant step towards weaning the country off of one of its most enduring self-created myths.

One of the British adventure writers who epitomises the genre to which Showalter refers is Edgar Wallace. In an immensely popular series of novels, written from 1911 to 1928, Wallace wrote about the adventures of Sanders, an administrator of British African colonial territories, and his two white subordinates, Captain Hamilton and Lieutenant Tibbets. Sanders is the epitome of the stern ruler, a man who has dedicated his life to the administration of the remote territories under his command. His description, as he appears to a visiting lady missionary in *The People of the River* (1911), embodies all of the qualities such a man “should” have:

She saw a man of medium height, dressed in spotless white, a big white helmet shading a face tanned to the colour of teak. His face was thin and clean-shaven, his eyes unwavering and questioning, his every movement conveying the impression of alert vitality. (*The People of the River*: 38)

He takes his responsibilities very seriously, to the extent of often preventing other whites from visiting out of fear for their safety. He expresses this to his visitor with typical blunt honesty: “I suppose I ought to be glad to see you,” he said, shaking his head reprovingly. “You’re the first white woman I’ve seen for many rains — but you’re a responsibility.” Lack of contact with others of his kind is a hardship, but is seen as an essential part of his duty.

Lieutenant Tibbets, better known as ‘Bones’, adds a comical touch to the stories. This comedy, however, reinforces the pleasure of reading the adventure story, rather than undermining it. Bones has also embraced the loneliness of the colonial ruler’s life, but has a great penchant for writing off for correspondence courses, or writing letters to the newspapers at home. One such incident in *Lieutenant Bones* (1918) has him placing an advertisement as a lonely soldier, which captures the imagination of a bored young woman back in England:

Valentine [. . .] retained to the end one correspondent — whose tragic lot, whose valiant and hair-raising adventures, whose modesty and whose power of description — [. . .] — held and fascinated her, for this man gave her pictures of a new world, a world peopled with savage and remorseless cannibal tribes, a world of dark, grim forests, of sunlit rivers, of mystery lands which the foot of all other white men than the writer had never penetrated, a land of terrifying storms, of gorgeous flowers, of vivid birds, and of silent and noble men. (*Lieutenant Bones*: 87)

The image is, of course, comical, and not at all modest, and Bones is mortified when Valentine actually comes out to visit him in person. To keep up the image he has created he leaves the comforts of the station and goes up river just before she arrives with only ‘a rifle, ammunition, some canned beef, and a waterproof sheet’ (97). That there is substance behind Bones’ supposed exaggeration is underlined when a rescue party arrives to find him stranded in a tree. He had single-handedly taken on a herd of elephants that had ‘been raiding a village’, and has been ‘chased [. . .] for about five miles, until he found a tree they couldn’t uproot’ (104). Climbing down he is chased again and an elephant misses him ‘by inches’ (106). He then swims to the riverboat, only to be chased by an enormous crocodile, which is shot just in the nick of time. Wallace’s story is indeed amusing, but the substance of Bones’ claims is not

at all in doubt. His error, and the reason for his acute embarrassment, is not that he lied, but that he was immodest. The message is that he should be more like the ‘silent and noble’ men of whom he wrote. Men like Sanders and Bones were the mainstay of popular fiction, providing a thrilling image of the adventures that awaited those brave enough to take on the burdens of the Empire. It would take many years for this image to collapse, but the following three stories, as a part of the same adventure-imperialism genre, did a lot to begin the weakening of its foundations.

The earliest of the short stories to which I will refer is Rudyard Kipling’s ‘At the End of the Passage,’ written in 1890. Kipling is most often seen as a firm apologist of the Empire, but in this story presents us with a harsh image of the toll it takes on its administrators. His work is in fact not just the simplistic flag-waving jingoism it has often been dismissed as. Even such a fierce critic as Edward Said, in his introduction to Kipling’s *Kim*, gives him due credit, along with Joseph Conrad who I will use as my second example. Although as Said says their fiction undeniably ‘belongs to the genre of adventure-imperialism [. . .] they are nevertheless writers with a claim on serious aesthetic and critical attention’ (*Kim*: 37). They possess ‘an additional complexity that makes them more interesting than all their other contemporaries’. For Harold Orel the apparent contradiction that lies between the traditional image Kipling has with readers, and his sometimes-shocking choice of subject matter, is what makes his writing still relevant today. He is an example of writers who do ‘not seem to satisfy the Establishment’s expectations of what they *should* be saying and writing’ (Orel: 213). In ‘At the End of the Passage’ Kipling undermines one of the cornerstones of the image of the period, that of the phlegmatic Englishman abroad, a rock of a man who never betrays emotion and always preserves the obligatory “stiff upper-lip”. Loneliness is at the root of the ultimate unravelling and nervous breakdown. The story centres on the weekly meetings of four white Englishmen all working alone in remote parts of India. These four have

nothing in common except for their whiteness and isolation. They are ‘not conscious of any special regard for each other’, but ‘ardently desire to meet, as men without water desire to drink’ (*Short Stories*: 83). They are ‘lonely folk who [understand] the dread meaning of loneliness’. Their host, a man called Hummil, is beginning to show signs of the strain of loneliness, behaving unforgivably by ‘[contriving] laboriously to insult directly and pointedly all the guests in succession’ (91). They quite naturally leave as soon as possible after their meal, at which point Hummil begs them to come back in a tone of ‘almost abject entreaty’. This departure from how a gentleman is supposed to behave is just the beginning of his decline, and is worrying enough for one of the men, a doctor named Spurstow, to agree reluctantly to stay behind and keep him company. The heat and isolation from his own kind have reduced Hummil to the brink of breakdown. He begs Spurstow desperately to give him some morphine to help him sleep, and when the ‘flood-gates of emotion’ finally break he ‘[clings] to him like a frightened child’ (94). Spurstow gives him a shot of morphine, and then, as he drifts off to sleep takes more practical suicide prevention measures: ‘And now, my friend, sleeplessness of your kind being very apt to relax the moral fibre in little matters of life and death, I’ll just take the liberty of spiking your guns.’ This should be a solution, but the madness has gone too far, as we can see when we learn the cause of his sleeplessness. Terrified by nightmares, he doesn’t dare fall asleep, even going to the extent of putting ‘a spur in the bed to sting’ him. The extent of his loss of ‘moral fibre’ would have been quite shocking and even unacceptable to readers accustomed to the more traditional image of manly empire builders, so Kipling allows Hummil to redeem himself at least to a certain degree. The following morning Spurstow offers to write him a medical certificate so he can be relieved, but Hummil refuses. The man who would be called upon to be his substitute has a wife and baby, and Hummil is convinced the climate would kill them, saying he will wait ‘till the Rains’ (97). This unselfishness is more in line with how he “should” be behaving, but it is unfortunately the final straw. When Spurstow finally has to leave

to return to his own responsibilities, Hummil is left ‘to face the echoing desolation of his bungalow’, and sees ‘standing in the verandah [. . .] the figure of himself’ (98). The figure accompanies him everywhere for the long week before his friends return, and when they do, it is only to find him dead ‘hands clinched by the side’, and in ‘the staring eyes [is] written terror beyond the expression of any pen’ (99). The horror of the expression reduces the men to trembling panic: “‘I can’t face it!’” whimpered Lowndes. “Cover up the face! Is there any fear on earth that can turn a man into that likeness? It’s ghastly. Oh, Spurstow, cover it up!” (100). It is only with the utmost effort that they can control their fear, as they cling in desperation to their “civilised” beliefs: “For pity’s sake let’s try to be rational” (102). They have to force themselves to forget the horror by returning to routine: “‘work’ll keep our wits together. Come on.’” They are ironically only kept sane by the work that they try to escape from each week. They are finding comfort in the very isolated routines that are slowly stripping away the protection of the “civilised” norms to which they so desperately cling.

In giving us this dire portrayal of the results of isolation, Kipling has laid bare the fallacy of the myth of the stoic empire-builder. The initial loss of manners, seen in Hummil’s treatment of his guests, his childlike panic at his inability to sleep and nightmares, his desperate reliance on morphine, and his final descent into insanity and horrific death, are all reactions unthinkable in a “civilised” English gentleman. Even in Hummil’s unselfish refusal to be replaced, an action in keeping with the traditional image of self-sacrifice, Kipling is attacking the colonial system. That there is no one to replace him is a condemnation of system that places such a heavy burden on so few men. In showing the loss of civilised behaviour to be the price of running a “civilising” empire, Kipling is deliberately creating a paradox. His readers must surely have expected more traditional flag-waving fare from such a well-known adventure writer. However, in exposing the fallacy of the accepted myth,

through the same genre of story that is supposed to promote it, Kipling is providing an unwelcome but overdue reminder that stories of stern duty and benevolent rule, are indeed just stories. The Empire actually takes away the very ‘moral fibre’ that it is supposed to impart. Kipling’s surprising double role, as seeming apologist for and at the same time critic of the Empire, has indeed been recognised by others. In *Narratives of empire* Zohreh Sullivan clarifies this complexity:

Kipling’s India helped construct a mythology of imperialism by reflecting both the real and the imaginary relationship between the British and their Indian subjects. What the community at home and in India generally chose to see in their enterprise was not what Kipling saw: they chose to see history and the work of imperialism in [. . .] glorified terms [. . .]. But Kipling [. . .] implied a disturbing analogy between the inner and outer circles, between private breakdown and public façade [. . .].
(Sullivan: 8-9)

Kipling work thus played a double role, creating ‘alternative fictions of empire that demythologized while it venerated the work of the English in other lands’ (10). He may well be best known for sustaining the myth of ‘the white man’s burden’, but to ignore the darker side of his writing, where loneliness ‘[madness], alcoholism, self-doubt, and suicide haunt his characters’ (14-15) is to do him a great disservice.

Another short story that explores the effects of loneliness on so-called ‘Empire builders’ is Joseph Conrad’s ‘An Outpost of Progress’ written in 1897, and set in a remote part of Africa. This story is even more shocking than Kipling’s, and again, coming from the pen of a writer more commonly associated with the traditional colonial literary diet, would have been quite unsettling for many readers. The ‘outpost of progress’ (*Short Stories*: 57) that the title refers to is a newly set up and very remote trading post surrounded by ‘impenetrable bush that [seems] to cut [it]

off from the rest of the world.’ The Director of the company leaves two new men in charge, cynically ‘pointing out to them the promising aspect’ of their assignment, only to be honest as he leaves on the river steam boat:

“Look at those two imbeciles. They must be mad at home to send me such specimens. I told those fellows to plant a vegetable garden, build new storehouses and fences, and construct a landing-stage. I bet nothing will be done! They won’t know how to begin. I always thought the station on this river useless, and they just fit the station!”

[. . .]

“At any rate, I am rid of them for six months [. . .]” (58).

The two are thus abandoned, feeling ‘themselves very much alone, when suddenly left unassisted to face the wilderness’. Conrad’s narrator comments on the gravity of their situation:

They were two perfectly insignificant and incapable individuals, whose existence is only rendered possible through the high organization of civilised crowds. Few men realize that their life, the very essence of their character, their capabilities and their audacities, are only the expression of their belief in the safety of their surroundings. [. . .]; every great and every insignificant thought belongs not to the individual but to the crowd [. . .].

Left alone, the two are without the support of their society and its institutions, and put in ‘contact with pure unmitigated savagery, with primitive nature and primitive man [bringing] sudden and profound trouble into [their hearts]’.

The two form an immediate bond as protection against their unease, walking ‘arm

in arm, drawing close to one another as children do in the dark' (*Short Stories*: 59). They initially try to create a work routine, but soon, however, are completely at a loose end. Having been 'released from the fostering care' of their superiors, they are 'like prisoners who, liberated after many years, do not know what use to make of their freedom' (60). They end up doing 'nothing, absolutely nothing' (61), and at first '[get] on well together in the fellowship of their [. . .] laziness.' Occasionally getting bouts of fever, they grow gradually weaker, physically and mentally. They pass the time reading, rarely venturing out, so that they '[understand] nothing, [care] for nothing but the passage of days that [separates] them from the steamer's return' (62).

Five months pass in this way, and with very little to show for their stay, they are uneasy about what the Director will say when he returns. It is at this stage that a group of armed and dangerous looking strangers arrive at the station. The foreman, Makola, talks with the warriors and finds that they have ivory for sale. He tells the two traders that the strangers are 'bad men' who 'fight with people, and catch women and children' (*Short Stories*: 68), but is nevertheless told to buy from them. During the night there are gunshots and a big disturbance, but Makola tells the two to stay indoors and leave everything to him. In the morning they find 'six splendid tusks' (69), but all of their native workers and their families are gone. It is at this point that the two realise what the trade was. Makola has 'sold [their] men for the tusks' (70). At first they are indignant. The leader of the two, Kayerts, is outraged:

"You fiend!" he yelled out.

[. . .]

"I dismiss you! I will report you — I won't look at the [tusks]. I forbid you to touch them. I order you to throw them into the river. You — you!"

His friend Carlier is similarly appalled:

“We can’t touch it, of course,” said Kayerts.

“Of course not,” assented Carlier.

“Slavery is an awful thing,” stammered out Kayerts in an unsteady voice.

“Frightful — the sufferings,” grunted Carlier with conviction. (71)

Next morning, however, when they see Makola trying to weigh the tusks, they unthinkingly help him, Carlier lifting the tusks with Makola, and Kayerts noting the weights. They agree that it’s ‘deplorable, but the men being Company’s men the ivory is Company’s ivory’ (72). They have become complicit with Makola, although still promise to ‘report to the Director’.

Unfortunately for Kayerts and Carlier, some of the men Makola sold belonged to the neighbouring tribe, which had been bringing them food. This source of provisions now dries up, as does any contact with anyone other than themselves and Makola. They are now utterly alone, a feeling exacerbated by what they have done, a terrible crime which seems to separate them even further from home and loved ones;

It was not the absolute and dumb solitude of the post that impressed them so much as an inarticulate feeling that something from within them was gone, something that worked for their safety, and had kept the wilderness from interfering with their hearts. (*Short Stories*: 73)

Their determination to tell the Director fades away in self-justification: “‘He won’t thank you if you blab. He is no better than you or me. Who will talk if we hold our tongues? There is nobody here’” (74). As the steamboat fails to arrive as scheduled, this is their main problem. They are alone with their guilt, and have lost the sense of

social norms that used to dictate what they did:

That was the root of the trouble! There was nobody there; and being left there alone with their weakness, they became daily more like a pair of accomplices than like a couple of devoted friends. They had heard nothing from home for eight months.

With provisions no longer being supplied by the local tribe, they are now reduced to nothing ‘but rice and coffee’, with the ‘last fifteen lumps’ of sugar ‘locked away’ in case of sickness. With this diet and absolutely nothing to do, the pair become morose and embittered: ‘Days passed, silent, exasperating, and slow. When the two men spoke, they snarled; and their silences were bitter, as if tinged by the bitterness of their thoughts.’ This bitterness finally boils over when Carlier demands sugar for his coffee: “‘Come! Out with that sugar, you stingy old slave dealer’” (75). The very banality of the cause of the argument makes its escalation even more horrifying:

“That joke is in very bad taste. Don’t repeat it.”

“Joke!” said Carlier, hitching himself forward in his seat.

“I am hungry — I am sick — I don’t joke! I hate hypocrites. You are a hypocrite. You are a slave-dealer. I am a slave-dealer. There’s nothing but slave-dealers in this cursed country. I mean to have sugar in my coffee today, anyhow!”

The argument suddenly becomes violent forcing Kayerts to flee to his room: ‘In less than a minute Carlier was kicking at the door furiously, howling, “If you don’t bring out that sugar, I will shoot you at sight, like a dog” (76). Terrified that Carlier will break the door down, Kayerts climbs out of the window, and the two begin a grotesque chase round and round the house. Finally misjudging his pursuer’s position, Kayerts runs into Carlier, they have a ‘violent collision’, and there is a ‘loud explosion’ as his revolver goes off. He rushes off again and then waits in terror: ‘he

had lost his revolver. He was disarmed and helpless! He waited for his fate. The other man made no sound. It was a stratagem. He was stalking him now!’ Eventually summoning up the courage to look he sees a ‘pair of white naked feet in red slippers’, and ‘[bursts] into tears of gratitude’. The banality of the sight of the dead slippers along with the childish tears, provides a fitting end to the grotesquely comical chase. There is nothing at all to admire here, a fact that is emphasised by his now finding that that Carlier was unarmed: ‘Kayerts shut his eyes. Everything was going round and round. He found life more terrible and difficult than death. He had shot an unarmed man’ (78). Makola provides the solution as he ‘thoughtfully [steps] over the corpse — “I think he died of a fever. Bury him tomorrow.”’ He then leaves ‘the two white men alone on the veranda.’ Makola has taken charge of the situation, reversing the roles of colonial authority, and provided a way out. That this way out, provided by a native, is a criminal lie, shows to what depths Kayerts has been reduced. The fact that in his exhaustion and delirium he is unable to follow the advice, strengthens the impression of utter failure and depravity.

Now utterly alone, Kayerts is unable to move, exhausted at having ‘plumbed in one short afternoon the depths of horror and despair’ (*Short Stories*: 78). He falls asleep with the corpse on the floor, only to wake in the morning in terror as he sees it still lying there. It is at this moment that the steamer finally arrives, the shriek of its whistle signalling that ‘civilisation’ (79) has returned to judge him. He panics and minutes later is found ‘hanging by a leather strap from the cross’ (80) of his predecessor’s grave, his toes only ‘a couple of inches above the ground’ (81), with his ‘swollen tongue’ sticking ‘irreverently’ out ‘at his Managing Director.’ The grotesque comedy of this final image underlines who is to blame for the tragedy, and at the same time adds a final touch to the destruction of the myth of the stoic empire builder. Our final image of Kayerts, a ‘pot-bellied ass’ (75), as Carlier describes him, could not be further from that of the archetypal English gentleman

of traditional adventure fiction. Conrad has portrayed the “heroes” of the story as weak and lazy, and has clearly shown us their physical and mental shortcomings. They are hypocritically complicit in slavery, and end up in a grotesquely funny chase around their house. Their argument originated in a ridiculous dispute over sugar, but ends in murder, madness, and finally suicide. This is what comes of being left ‘alone with their weakness’ for eight months, in an utterly strange country, with no contact at all with the civilising protection of their own society. As in Kipling’s story the devastating effects of isolation are made starkly clear, but here they go beyond insanity into the realm of contemptible, yet nonetheless horrific, crime. A final interesting point about ‘An Outpost of Progress’ is made by Cedric Watts in *A Preface to Conrad*. Watts notes that the story first appeared in the magazine *Cosmopolis* in ‘June and July 1897-the year of Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee’ (Watts: 60). Alongside articles praising British imperial power we thus see ‘Conrad’s Kayerts [shoot] the unarmed Carlier and [hang] himself from a cross’ (61). For Watts the timing of the publication of this story with its shockingly symbolic ending, undeniably ‘contains a commentary on the Jubilee celebrations’ and the imperialism they embodied.

Having seen loneliness as the cause of insanity in Kipling’s story, and leading to the crimes of slavery, murder and suicide in Conrad’s, it might seem difficult to find more shocking subject matter with which to undermine the empire building myth. This, however, is just what Somerset Maugham does in ‘The Force of Circumstance’ (1924), a story set in Malaya. In *W. Somerset Maugham* Archie Loss recognises the similarity of the theme of ‘exile’ in an ‘exotic setting’ with the authors I have already commented on: ‘Other authors in England had written of colonial types in similar settings-Rudyard Kipling and Joseph Conrad come to mind-but Maugham [. . .] focuses especially on the effect of an exotic environment upon marital (or extramarital) relationships’ (Loss: 72). In the story, the main character Guy is an

administrator who has just returned from a home leave with a new English wife. As with Conrad's two protagonists, physically he is deliberately made the antithesis of the empire builder of popular fiction: 'He was a little round man, with a red face like the full moon, and blue eyes. He was rather pimply' (*Short Stories*: 130). His wife is, however, very happy with him as he is 'a gay, jolly little man who [takes] nothing very solemnly, and [is] constantly laughing.' She sums up her feelings in a joke: "'You're an ugly, little fat man, Guy, but you've got charm. I can't help loving you.'" Their married idyll is not to last though, as the first hints of unease begin to appear. Doris is worried by a native woman who is 'hanging about' (132) the house, and is curious about some 'little boys' in the village, who are 'much whiter than the others.' Guy tries to explain it away, saying that a 'lot of fellows have native wives, and then when they go home or marry they pension them off and send them back to their village' (133). He even tries to make her understand: "'It's awfully lonely on an outstation. Why, often one doesn't see another white man for six months on end. A fellow comes out here when he's only a boy. [. . .] There are excuses, you know'" (133-4). The woman keeps returning, however, and when Doris sees the servants trying to make her go away and 'treating her quite brutally' (140), the truth can no longer be avoided. Guy explains, looking 'haggard' (141). He uses his loneliness to try and make her understand: "'I like people. I'm a noisy blighter. I like to have a good time. All sorts of things make me laugh and you must have somebody to laugh with'" (142). He describes the effects of his loneliness:

"I couldn't have been more of a prisoner if I had been in jail. Night after night it was the same. I tried drinking three or four whiskies, but it's poor fun drinking alone, and it didn't cheer me up; it only made me feel rather rotten next day. I tried going to bed immediately after dinner, but I couldn't sleep. I used to lie in bed getting hotter and hotter, and more wide awake, till I didn't know what to do with myself. [. . .] Do you know, I got so low, I was so sorry for myself that sometimes [. . .] —

sometimes I used to cry.”(143)

The lack of sleep, drinking, and childlike tears are reminiscent of Kipling’s story, again being far from “the done thing” that readers would expect. The shocking aspect of the affair is that Guy seems to think he has done nothing wrong. He feels he has covered his obligations, in spite of having three children with the woman: “I told her it was all over. I gave her what I’d promised. She always knew it was only a temporary arrangement. I was fed up with it. I told her I was going to marry a white woman” (144). The story has now only come out because she has been blackmailing him, making him pay ‘an awful lot of money’ (145). Doris is shocked at the sordid tale, and withdraws into herself speaking to him ‘as though she were making conversation with a stranger’ (147). She sleeps separately from him, leaving him to his loneliness, self-justifying thoughts, and heartbreak:

He thought once more over all he had said to her [. . .]. He didn’t know how else he could have put it. After all, the chief point was that he’d done the same as everybody else, and it was all over long before he met her. Of course as things turned out he had been a fool, but anyone can be wise after the event. He put his hand to his heart. Funny how it hurt him there.

Disgusted, Doris decides to leave. The thought of him having lived with the woman for ten years and then abandoning her with three children is too much for her: “It’s a physical thing, I can’t help it, it’s stronger than I am. [. . .]. Oh, it’s loathsome. The touch of you is odious to me.” She leaves and Guy is left alone, again unable to sleep with his ‘head [aching] miserably’ (155). He no longer needs to ‘dress for dinner’, that sacred ritual of the colonial lifestyle, instead putting on ‘a loose native jacket and a sarong’ and walking ‘barefoot’. He is committing the cardinal sin in the coloniser of “going native”, and there is nothing left for him but to complete

the transformation. When his son calls at the door he realises the futility of further struggle:

Guy looked at the boy intently. The boy said nothing more. He sat and waited his eyes cast down shyly. Then Guy in deep and bitter reflection buried his face in his hands. What was the use? It was finished. Finished! He surrendered. He sat back in his chair and sighed deeply.

“Tell your mother to pack up her things and yours. She can come back.”

“When?” asked the boy, impassively.

Hot tears trickled down Guy's funny, round spotty face.

“Tonight.” (155-6)

The depth of his misery and shame is powerfully shown here. His son is referred to as just ‘the boy’, and whereas we can see his shyness, and recognise him as a victim, Guy is thinking only of himself, lost in his own misery. Not only has he broken the rigid colonial code by “going native”, in other words adopting native habits and living with a native woman, he has also sunk into self-pity. The image of the tears on his ‘round spotty face’ is a final indictment against him. Loneliness has turned him into a self-pitying, self-centred figure, a man who by traditional colonial standards is worthy only of shocked contempt.

As I have shown, these three short stories by Kipling, Conrad, and Maugham, are remarkably similar in thematic content. The root cause of their miserable endings lies in the loneliness of the colonial experience, a terrible burden that exposes usually concealed human weaknesses. The mark of an English gentleman was that he was traditionally not expected to display his emotions. This was an important part of the myth of moral superiority that helped justify the hierarchies of the colonial system, as it was just this stern self-control which was supposed to separate him from the

weaker native subjects. All of the characters cry in front of others, an unpardonable offence against the traditional code, and from this obvious sign of weakness descend into even more unthinkable behaviour. They are the opposite of what readers would have expected them to be, from the ‘vile bad temper’ (*Short Stories*: 90) of Hummil, to the comical ugliness of Kayerts and Guy, further puncturing the myth of the stoic coloniser of popular fiction. Madness, complicity in slavery, murder, suicide, and perhaps worst of all, sexual impropriety and miscegenation, are the fruits of the colonial system, such outcomes being shown as the natural outcome when human weakness is exposed by total isolation. Readers may have wanted to believe in the myth typified by the vastly popular Sanders’ adventures, but these three writers painted a much more realistic, if perhaps unwelcome picture of the colonial experience. The image of the stoic Sahib ruling benevolently over inferior natives would take many years to be finally discredited, but stories like these, coming as they did from such popular writers, would at the very least have begun to undermine it.

Notes

- 1) All references to a cited text will appear after quotations; passages without page reference are from the last-cited page. Unless otherwise stated, all italics are the author’s and all ellipses mine.
- 2) Showalter is quoting from Edward Salmon, ‘What Boys Read’, *Fortnightly Review*, 45 (1886).

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Loneliness: exposing the myth of the stoic Sahib in colonialist-era literature

Peter Turberfield

This article looks at three short stories that describe the effects of loneliness on colonial-era administrators or traders posted to far-flung parts of the British Empire, to show how the myth of the stoic English gentleman abroad began to be eroded. Beginning with a look at an example of the popular literary image, as seen in the popular Sanders of the River series, it shows how three different writers used the same genre of adventure fiction to effectively undermine it. Far from the moral rectitude expected by contemporary readers, these stories show how the forced isolation of the colonial system on its representatives could produce horrific results. They starkly introduce the taboo themes of madness, slavery, murder, suicide, sexual impropriety, and miscegenation to reveal the true ugliness of a system too long promoted by its literary image of heroic self-sacrifice.