

Physiognomy: the ugliness of facial discrimination in colonial-era literature

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The use of physiognomy, the 'supposed art of judging character from facial characteristics' (OED), is a well-known device of nineteenth-century literature. A hero had to be good-looking and physically robust, embodying widely accepted ideals of manliness. His counterpart equally had to fit the description of a stage villain ; facial peculiarities, unnatural posture and weakness of build literally embodied his moral inferiority. This stylistic cliché was such a staple of the British literary diet that it was quite naturally co-opted to help depict and justify the arbitrary and unfair hierarchical relationships that had to be created to ensure the smooth functioning of Britain's extensive Empire. To modern readers this stylistic trait can be grating, to say the least, but its pervasive influence was (and arguably still is) so great, as to make it impossible to simply dismiss as an unfortunate legacy of a colonial past. Although, of course, views on race have changed, we are still susceptible to the myth of the handsome hero, and still culturally inclined to feel a sense of superiority when confronted with an Otherness of appearance. The fact that this seemingly instinctive reaction was a culturally created phenomenon means that it is difficult for reason alone to reverse its lasting effect. Although today's world, through the influence of mass entertainment and the globalisation of popular culture, is more accepting of racial diversity, the only way to effectively undermine the discrimination ubiquitous in nineteenth and early twentieth-century fiction initially was for it to be exposed from within

its own genre. To show how one author tried to do just this, I will give a brief background to emphasise how deeply engrained the myth of the link between appearance and morality was, and then analyse a brilliantly crafted short story that exposes the myth's hypocrisy as an integral part of the readers' literary assumptions.

The grip that physiognomy, the myth of character being revealed through appearance, had on the Victorian psyche is clear in the abundance of examples of this stylistic device that immediately come to mind. Charles Dickens, for instance, made extensive use of it. To give just one example, *Oliver Twist*, first published in 1837, illustrates the typical stereotypes. We are in no doubt as to the character of the criminal Fagin, who is introduced as 'a very old shrivelled Jew, whose villainous-looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair' (Dickens: 105). As for the hero Oliver, our pity for him is desired, and consequently he is 'a pale thin child, somewhat diminutive in stature, and decidedly small in circumference' (49). As for his face he is the 'living copy' (132) of a portrait of a lady (his mother) who had 'a beautiful, mild face' (128), and 'sorrowful' eyes (129). Bill Sykes, the real villain of the story has 'a broad heavy countenance with a beard of three days' growth, and two scowling eyes ; one of which displayed various parti-coloured symptoms of having been recently damaged by a blow' (136). His mistress Nancy, the prostitute with the heart of gold, and her friend Bet, are described as 'not exactly pretty' but have 'a great deal of colour in their faces, and looked quite stout and hearty. Being remarkably free and agreeable in their manners' (111). This repetitive use of physiognomy, the belief that facial features reveal what a person is like, is an extremely convenient device for a writer such as Dickens given the very large number of characters that

people his works. The use of physiognomy, however, although pervasive, is not central to Dickens' plots. So widely accepted had it become later in the century, however, that it finally could assume this role.

In Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, published in 1886, physiognomy no longer plays a merely supportive role, as a kind of stylistic short cut, but becomes the very driving force of the plot. In the short novel, Dr Jekyll recognises 'the thorough and primitive duality of man' (Stevenson: 82), and dreams of finding a way to separate the two sides to his character. He develops a procedure to do just that, and following the logic of physiognomy, finds his two identities to be radically different in appearance:

The evil side of my nature [...] was less robust and less developed than the good [...] Edward Hyde was so much smaller, slighter, and younger than Henry Jekyll. Even as good shone upon the countenance of the one, evil was written broadly and plainly on the face of the other. Evil besides [...] had left on that body an imprint of deformity and decay. (84)

This revelation of character through appearance is quite evident to all who come across Hyde, as the lawyer Utterson remarks: 'there was something abnormal and misbegotten in the very essence of the creature that now faced me - something seizing, surprising and revolting' (78). At first Dr Jekyll enjoys the separation of his two alter egos following the idealism of his theory:

If each [...] could but be housed in separate identities, life would be relieved of all that was unbearable ; the unjust might go his way,

delivered from the aspirations and remorse of his more upright twin ; and the just could walk steadfastly and securely on the upward path, doing the good things in which he found his pleasure, and no longer exposed to disgrace and penitence by the hands of this extraneous evil.

Gradually, however, the evil side of his character takes over, and his appearance duly changes to embody his moral decay. The horror of this transformation is condensed in a scene in which Dr Jekyll, waking from a nap, looks at his hand. His own was 'professional in shape and size ; it was large, firm, white and comely' (88). What he sees when he wakes up, however, is something entirely different ; a hand that is 'lean, corded, knuckly, of a dusky pallor, and thickly shaded with a swart growth of hair.' The story ends with Dr Jekyll's suicide, providing an appropriate moral ending for Victorian readers. To surrender so completely to the temptations of moral depravity can have but one outcome. It is a sin that leaves an indelible and immediately recognisable mark on its practitioner, and leads inevitably to a horrifying death. For readers in late nineteenth-century Britain, where disfigurement and death from syphilis were often seen as the just deserts for indulgence in sexual promiscuity, or worse still, an "unnatural" (homosexual) life-style, this moral ending would have been all-the-more terrifying even though it was expected. It would indeed have probably been a most satisfying conclusion for a self-righteously virtuous public.

Another novel which relies on readers' acceptance of the link between a handsome face and moral probity is Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, first published in 1891. On seeing the perfection of the

portrait his friend Basil has painted of him, Dorian makes a life-changing prayer:

But this picture will remain always young It will never be older than this particular day of June.... If it were only the other way! If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old! For that - for that - I would give everything! Yes, there is nothing in the whole world I would not give! I would give my soul for that! (*Dorian Gray*: 49)

He is later corrupted by his cynical mentor Lord Henry, and revels in all kinds of debauchery, yet following his shockingly expressed desire, his appearance remains unchanged, belying the life he is leading. His reputation inevitably suffers, as his excesses cannot remain entirely secret, yet no one quite believes the rumours they hear about him, given his ever-boyish good looks. It is the portrait, shamefully 'hidden away in a locked room', which is 'to become a monstrous and loathsome thing' (135), bearing witness to his depravity. When Basil, the artist, eventually insists on seeing his work of art he is horrified at 'the hideous face on the canvas grinning at him' (189), and at what it reveals about his friend. He begs Dorian to repent his sins, but instead, in a fit of rage Dorian murders him. When Dorian is no longer able to stand the sight of his picture, which, as it 'had been like conscience to him' had begun to obsess him, he decides to destroy it. He slashes it with a knife, and in so doing kills himself, reversing roles with the portrait. His body is found by his servants:

When they entered they found, hanging upon the wall, a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him, in all the wonder

of his exquisite youth and beauty. Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage. It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognized who it was. (264)

This melodramatic end was meant to provide a suitably moral ending, but in fact didn't satisfy the prudish public as Stevenson's ending did. Condemned as an immoral work, it was used against Wilde when he brought a libel action against the Marquis of Queensberry, to show the corruption of his character, and may have contributed to the resulting harshness of his own conviction and two-year prison sentence for immoral acts (i.e. homosexuality). As Peter Ackroyd remarks in his introduction to the novel 'the publication of *Dorian Gray* marked the first stage in Wilde's long descent into open scandal and eventual infamy', as he 'did not realize that it was [so] self-revealing' (8). The idea that a man could be morally depraved and still have the good looks of an innocent youth was unacceptable to a public to whom the impossibility of this feat had been so insistently stressed. Wilde's own outrageous sense of sartorial elegance might even have been seen as a mirror image of Dorian's concealment of depravity. To quote Vivian from Wilde's earlier essay 'The Decay of Lying' (1889), Life had indeed imitated Art: 'Literature always anticipates life, it does not copy it, but moulds it to its purpose' (Lying: 75). Although the idea of physiognomy had started as merely a fictional timesaving device, it had now become an accepted reality in itself. As Wilde unfortunately experienced at first hand, what had started out as a harmless myth, created for purely artistic purposes, had actually become quite a dangerous tool of forced social conformity.

The way in which critics' moral disapproval of Wilde's novel was used in a criminal prosecution shows just how well accepted the physiognomic myth had become. That it would become complicit in the artistic justification of the equally artificially created hierarchies of the colonial system was but a natural progression. The perceived racial inferiority of the black African peoples, for example, was clearly apparent to writers in what they saw as the grotesqueness of their features and the childishness of their behaviour. Here, a clear difference of appearance lay, and as something so obviously "Other", it was regarded with a kind of humorous tolerance. Such ridiculous specimens as the stereotypical cannibal might provoke a frisson of horror, but were no serious threat to Western civilisation. In the Abyssinian crisis in 1868, for example, Punch depicted King Theodore in cartoons as a primitive savage, and demanded that he be captured and exhibited in a cage like a gorilla, the outrage being that someone so obviously like a monkey could hold white Europeans hostage.¹¹ He might have been a dangerous madman, but was merely living up to our expectations of what savages did. What really presented a threat to 'white people', and consequently provoked the strongest reactions, was the possibility of any mixing of the races. This is quite evident in the writing of Edgar Wallace, whose series of novels written from 1911 to 1928 on the adventures of Sanders, an administrator of British African colonial territories, was immensely popular. In *Lieutenant Bones*, first published in 1918, one of the villains is a rich trader, whose mixed race negates all of his admirable qualities. His family is snidely complimented as being 'exceedingly presentable' (Wallace: 180). Although they 'endowed cottage hospitals and made generous contributions to charities', because of their racial background they are always regarded as outsiders: 'Even to the fourth generation there was

on the finger nail of every Seccondi a liver-coloured half moon just where nail and cuticle meet, and this was probably one of the explanations of Society's reluctance to clasp the Seccondis to its bosom'. This taint of 'native blood' that 'the finger nails betrayed' is immediately noticed by one of the officers, Lieutenant Tibbets, otherwise known affectionately as 'Bones':

He had all the white man's aversion to that blood which was the distinguishing feature of the Seccondis.

The native he understood and loved. The white man splashed with tar raised all his hackles. (191)

However rich and well-educated Seccondi may be, his appearance, and consequently his character, is summed up in the dismissive phrase 'splashed with tar'. When Seccondi lives up to this "blackened" image and tries to kidnap a white woman to be his wife, a crime all the more horrible for its implications of rape and the miscegenation he himself symbolises, Bones comes to the rescue, using a racial taunt to put him off his guard:

Bones thrust forward his jaw, and into his eyes came that look of scorn which Andreas could not mistake.

'You infernal nigger!' snarled Bones.

The man stepped back as if he had been shot, and the girl stumbled to Bones' feet. (204)

Seccondi wilts before the contempt of this representative of the white society he craves to be accepted by. Bones' insult encapsulates the way in which the myth of the link between appearance and moral worth is used

to keep such perceived low-life in its place. Bones is being portrayed as a kindly colonial officer here. The reason 'he understood and loved' the natives under his control is because they are to him like children, and any wrongdoing they may indulge in is classified as being 'naughty' (57). It is the threat that a mixing of races presents that causes him to use the doubly charged insult of 'nigger'. In collapsing before Bones' rejection, Secondi is perfectly fulfilling the role he has been cast in ; a man whose moral weakness is an integral part of the stigma that is apparent to all in the appearance of his face and telltale fingernails.

Another colonial era writer who exploits the physiognomic myth is John Buchan. In his immensely popular adventure novel *Prester John* (1910), the hero/narrator, David Crawford, takes an immediate dislike to Henriques, a fellow passenger on a boat to South Africa, initially based entirely on his looks:

There was another steerage passenger whom I could not help observing because of my dislike of his appearance. He, too, was a little man, by name Henriques, and in looks the most atrocious villain I have ever clapped eyes on. He had a face the colour of French mustard - a sort of dirty green - and blood-shot, beady eyes with the whites all yellowed with fever. He had waxed moustaches, and a curious, furtive way of walking and looking about him. We of the steerage were careless in our dress, but he was always clad in immaculate white linen, with pointed, yellow shoes to match his complexion. (Buchan: 23-4)

Crawford repeats this description to Aitken, a fellow Scot with

consequently impeccably "white" credentials, who laughs 'uproariously', and says 'Tut, my man, most of the subjects of his majesty the King of Portugal would answer to that description' (31). On his every appearance Henriques is described in similarly derogatory terms, or often simply referred to with contempt as 'the Portugoose'. Although Henriques is indeed the main villain of the story, and as such a natural target for physiognomic treatment, the extent to which Buchan's narrator Crawford goes in his descriptions of the man is quite remarkable. The other villain, the leader of the native uprising, the black Reverend Laputa, is in contrast described in the most admiring of terms. In a ceremony to proclaim him king and leader of the rebellion, a naked Laputa is described as 'a noble form of a man' (102), with a face that has 'the passive pride of a Roman emperor' (105). Crawford recognises him as an enemy, but nonetheless cannot hide his admiration: 'I knew his heart, black with all the lusts of paganism. I knew that his purpose was to deluge the land with blood. But I knew also that in his eyes his mission was divine, and that he felt behind him all the armies of Heaven' (106). The contrast between the descriptions of the two men could not be greater. Later, when Crawford dreams of the two fleeing the police and army, his vision is of 'two men, one tall and black, the other little and sallow' (174), again repeating his prejudice. He sees the two in terms of quasi-religious imagery, with the emphasis consistently being on their appearance:

There is a story of one of King Arthur's knights - Sir Percival, I think - that once, riding through a forest, he found a lion fighting with a serpent. He drew his sword and helped the lion, for he thought it was the more natural beast of the two. To me Laputa was the lion, and Henriques the serpent ; and though I had no good will to either, I was

determined to spoil the serpent's game. (115-6)

Laputa is a noble enemy, whereas Henriques is just a villain out to make a dishonest profit from the uprising: 'I was consumed with a passion of fury against that murdering yellow devil. With Laputa I was not angry ; he was an open enemy, playing a fair game. But my fingers itched to get at the Portugoose - that double-dyed traitor to his race' (91). Here, the depth of his hatred makes Crawford contradict himself. He describes Henriques as a 'traitor to his race', yet has not at any time recognised him as "white". Laputa himself points out this contradiction, when he rejects Crawford's warnings about Henriques and justifies the trust he has placed in his ally:

You misunderstand again, Mr Storekeeper. The Portuguese is what you call a 'mean white'. His only safety is among us. I am campaigner enough to know that an enemy, who has a burning grievance against my other enemies, is a good ally. You are too hard on Henriques. You and your friends have treated him as a Kaffir [...]. (153)

Crawford and his like have indeed treated Henriques as a Kaffir, or a 'yellow devil' (91), not as a white, and to expect him to be on their side because of his race is astonishingly hypocritical. Just as with Secondi in Wallace's *Lieutenant Bones*, a racist application of physiognomy to the plot has made him into an 'infernal nigger', and that is exactly what he has become in the eyes of the narrator and his readers. While Secondi represents the threat of miscegenation, Henriques represents the threat of a rival colonial power. The natives, even in rebellion, are straightforward, and easy to deal with, but a European allied with savages against his race, is seen as a dangerous yellow serpent. In short, these are the

kind of images that were fed to the British population to emphasise the importance of racial purity in their colonial role. Assumption of what Kipling called 'the white man's burden', the perceived duty to look after inferior native peoples, required a confirmation of the superiority of that very whiteness, the skin colour that symbolised the noble qualities of the conscientious colonial ruler. Any taint of "yellow" or "the tar-brush" threatened to undermine the black and white morality, both literally and metaphorically, on which the colonial system was based.

The fallacy of physiognomy, as we have seen, played a great part in the narrative of Empire. Starting out as merely a stylistic device, as a kind of convenient cultural shorthand for many nineteenth-century writers, it developed into a tool that insidiously reinforced the myths of the natural basis of colonial hierarchies. To attempt to undermine such a widely accepted mythology would be read as iconoclastic or even virtually sacrilegious, given that looking after the Empire and its "heathen" peoples was seen as a kind of God-given duty. Anyone directly criticising it would indeed have been seen, like Henriques, as an unnatural 'traitor to his race'. In the light of this recognition of the power of the myth, it was quite natural that for years no one had the courage to attempt to undermine it at all. Authors wanting to sell books could not afford to offend one of their public's most dearly held beliefs. Indeed, when Stevenson stopped writing his immensely popular boys' adventure stories and took for his new protagonists "mean whites" in the South Seas, and their experiences of the dark side of empire, he immediately lost his readership. Publishers looked askance at his work and only agreed to publish two of his short stories 'The Beach at Falesá' (1892) and 'Ebb Tide' (1893) after extensive revisions.

To undermine the prejudice that physiognomy had come to embody, however, is just what Somerset Maugham succeeded in doing in his devastatingly effective short story 'Mr. Know-All' (1921). The story is set on an ocean liner going from San Francisco to Yokohama, and the narrator opens with the striking first line 'I was prepared to dislike Max Kelada even before I knew him' (Maugham: 317). The reason for this immediate prejudice is immediately made clear as the narrator is forced to share a cabin with him on the crowded ship:

[When] I was told the name of my companion my heart sank. It suggested closed port-holes and the night air rigidly excluded. It was bad enough having to share a cabin for fourteen days with anyone [...], but I should have looked on it with less dismay if my fellow passenger's name had been Smith or Brown. (317)

From the instant he hears this foreign sounding name, the narrator finds fault with everything about the man. The cabin becomes claustrophobic with Mr. Kelada's unpacked luggage, which is in itself, unreasonably, a cause for dislike. His suitcases have 'too many labels' and his 'wardrobe trunk was too big'. The narrator says that his brushes 'would have been all the better for a scrub', and snidely remarks that his toilet things reveal him to be a 'patron of the excellent Monsieur Coty.' This is just for a beginning, as it is when he gets to meet his nemesis that the full extent of his contempt is revealed. When Mr. Kelada introduces himself his smile shows 'a row of flashing teeth', a description obviously meant to emphasise a swarthy complexion. This is soon confirmed in a more detailed description of his appearance, after the narrator tactlessly expresses surprise that Mr. Kelada is English:

King George has many strange subjects. Mr. Kelada was short and of a sturdy build, clean-shaved and dark skinned, with a fleshy, hooked nose and very large lustrous and liquid eyes. His long black hair was sleek and curly. He spoke with a fluency in which there was nothing English and his gestures were exuberant. I felt pretty sure that a closer inspection of that British passport would have betrayed the fact that Mr. Kelada was born under a bluer sky than is generally seen in England. (317-8)

In a genre such as the short story, the use of physiognomy is an extremely useful tool in economically compressing description. Here it can be seen to be fulfilling its role to perfection. We already have an excellent thumbnail portrait of Mr. Kelada, and everything that follows will confirm the stereotype his description embodies. The narrator takes great exception to everything Mr. Kelada does from now on, no matter how trivial these actions may be, and as this narrator is relating his story in the first-person, the readers are drawn in to identify with his irritation. Mr. Kelada's conversation may be interesting as he discusses 'plays, pictures, and politics', but it is dismissed as 'chatty' (318). He is patriotic, but this otherwise admirable characteristic is also belittled ; 'The Union Jack is an impressive piece of drapery, but when it is flourished by a gentleman from Alexandria or Beirut, I cannot but feel that it loses somewhat in dignity.' He is friendly, but this friendliness is regarded as 'familiarity'. Try as the narrator and his fellow passengers might, Mr. Kelada is 'impossible to snub' (319), and through his active participation in social events he becomes 'the best-hated man in the ship.' Their dislike is quite open, but he is impervious to it: 'We called him Mr Know-All, even to his face. He

took it as a compliment.' At the dinner table he is 'intolerable':

For the better part of an hour then he had us at his mercy. He was hearty, jovial, loquacious and argumentative. He knew everything better than anybody else and it was an affront to his overweening vanity that you should disagree with him. He would not drop a subject, however unimportant till he had brought you round to his way of thinking. The possibility that he could be mistaken never occurred to him.

As readers we are drawn into this dislike, having no outside point of reference other than that of the first-person narrator. It is difficult to see through the barrier of negativity he creates, so we end up with little choice but to share his one-sided view.

The scene has now been set for the introduction of two other characters, who are essential to the approaching climax of the story. Ironically, they too are depicted along the stereotypical lines of physiognomy. Mr. Ramsay is described as 'a great heavy fellow from the Middle-West, with loose fat under a tight skin [bulging] out of his ready-made clothes' (319). This is essentially all we have to know about him, except for the fact that he 'was as dogmatic as Mr. Kelada and resented bitterly the Levantine's cocksureness. The discussions they had were acrimonious and interminable.' The narrator obviously dislikes him, but given that he is white, not as much as 'the Levantine'. The other character, Mrs. Ramsay, meets with his approval as she is described as 'a very pretty-little thing, with pleasant manners and a sense of humour.' She is dressed 'very simply', but with 'an effect of quiet distinction.' With

the protagonists now all so neatly characterised, the story can proceed. It is from this point, however, that through their ensuing actions they are all at last allowed to define themselves. We are still seeing through the biased eyes of the narrator, but whether or not they live up to his jaded characterisation is no longer something he alone can dictate.

The climax is based on a simple argument that Mr. Kelada has with Mr. Ramsay over Mrs. Ramsay's pearl necklace. Mr. Kelada is adamant that it is genuine and very expensive, as pearls are his area of expertise: 'I know all the best pearls in the world, and what I don't know about pearls isn't worth knowing' (320). Mr. Ramsay, on the other hand, is equally adamant that his wife 'bought it at a department store the day before we left New York, for eighteen dollars' (321). Living up to his characterisation as a fat insensitive bore, Mr. Ramsay is unaware of his wife's discomfort as the argument heats up, and they make a hundred-dollar bet on who is right. Mrs. Ramsay, although very reluctant, eventually has to hand the necklace to Mr. Kelada, and the climax of the story unfolds:

The Levantine took a magnifying glass from his pocket and closely examined it. A smile of triumph spread over his smooth and swarthy face. He handed back the chain. He was about to speak. Suddenly he caught sight of Mrs. Ramsay's face. It was so white that she looked as though she were about to faint. She was staring at him with wide and terrified eyes. They had a desperate appeal, and it was so clear that I wondered why her husband did not see it.

Mr. Kelada stopped with his mouth open. He flushed deeply. You could almost see the effort he was making over himself.

'I was mistaken', he said. 'It's very good imitation [...]'.(321)

For this climb-down Mr. Kelada has 'to put up with a good deal of chaff' (322) as well as lose his hundred dollars. They all see it as 'a fine joke that Mr. Know-All had been caught out.' Next morning, however, an envelope is pushed under the cabin door with a hundred dollars in it. Mr. Kelada tears 'the envelope into little bits', and says on being asked if the pearls were real: 'If I had a pretty little wife I shouldn't let her spend a year in New York while I stayed at Kobe'. He has been 'made to look a perfect damned fool', but did the gentlemanly thing and kept Mrs. Ramsay's secret.

The story is simple enough at first glance. The narrator sees how well Mr. Kelada has behaved, and comments '[at] that moment I did not entirely dislike Mr. Kelada' (322). Even a 'Levantine' is capable of having finer feelings. This interpretation of the story is, however, too simplistic. When we consider that the narrator told the story, all the while knowing what happened in the end, we are made aware of how he has deliberately exposed the fallacy of his own prejudice. The story is entitled 'Mr. Know-All', and we assumed that this refers to Mr. Kelada. On reading the story as a kind of confession, however, the name 'Mr. Know-All' can be seen to more appropriately refer to the narrator himself. His racist descriptions in no way prepare us for the delicacy and tact of Mr. Kelada's behaviour, and they are consequently revealed all the more starkly as erroneous and ignorant. Readers used to the conventions of colonial-era writing might very well have been complicit with the narrator in sneering at Mr. Kelada, and if so are themselves now exposed as bigoted and wrong. Rather than telling the story from the offended Mr. Kelada's point of view, Maugham has exposed the racist ideas of physiognomy for what

they are, from within. He is forcing those who have blindly accepted the culturally created myth to see themselves for what they are. The story is not about Mr. Kelada at all. It is about the assumptions of the narrator himself, and by extension those of his readers. Mr. Kelada says 'No one likes being made to look a perfect damned fool', but this does not refer only to his immediate situation. Quite to the contrary, it refers to both the narrator and his readers, making the story extremely unsettling for those who just passively accepted the colonial myths upon which generations of "Englishmen" were raised. In mimicking the racially suborned myth of physiognomy, Maugham has successfully exposed the literary device as a perpetuator of unjust political and social hierarchies.

End Notes:

- 1) Punch, December 1867, and May 1868.

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The use of physiognomy, the 'supposed art of judging character from facial characteristics' is a well-known device of nineteenth-century British literature. A hero's good-looks embodied his virtue and correspondingly a villain's ugliness his moral inferiority. This stylistic cliché was such a staple of the British literary diet that it was quite naturally co-opted in racial terms to help depict and justify the hierarchical relationships necessary for the smooth functioning of Britain's extensive Empire. The terms 'white' and 'black' thus imply far more than skin colour, and take on a new moral significance. This article will start with a brief background to emphasise how deeply engrained the myth of the link between appearance and morality was, and then analyse a brilliantly crafted short story by Somerset Maugham, that exposes the myth's racist hypocrisy as an integral part of the readers' literary assumptions.