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Not All R & R is Good: Religiosity and Racism Within

Charles Dickens's and Wilkie Collins's *The Perils of Certain English Prisoners*

In their 1857 collaborative Christmas novella, *The Perils of Certain English Prisoners*, Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins present various instances of blatant and unabashed racism on the island of Silver-Store. From nearly the beginning, the story's narrator, Gill Davis, notes, "I have stated myself to be a man of no learning, and, if I entertain prejudices, I hope allowance may be made. I will now confess to one. It may be a right one or it may be a wrong one; but, I never did like Natives, except in the form of oysters" (12). This racist attitude is not singular to Gill. Other inhabitants of the island treat the native peoples in equally demeaning ways. When Gill asks Miss Maryon if the "Sambos" are trustworthy, she replies, "Perfectly! We are all very kind to them, and they are very grateful to us" (10). While Miss Maryon is not promoting a physical, violent form of racism, she is still supporting a distinction in which benevolent, white Englishmen are on top, and Sambos are indebted to them. Edward Said describes this attitude of the English as being part of "the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage--and even produce--the Orient politically, socio-logically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period" (3). While fictitious Silver-Store is located in the West Indies, as opposed to a country in the East, or "Orient," it is still a British colony and therefore subject to English ideological control, and English racial superiority. Although it initially appears as though the English characters find

themselves superior solely because they are white and British, the English are continually shown to be dominant, even over other well-off Europeans, such as Don Pedro, due to their Christian religiosity. Throughout the text, it becomes increasingly apparent that Dickens and Collins utilize religion as the means of perpetuating the racial superiority mindset, thereby suggesting that the ideologies of religiosity and racism are highly difficult to separate.

In spite of the fact that *The Perils* was a collaborative effort, Dickens's beliefs about religion in conjunction with the ideal purpose of British colonialism permeate the text. This is little surprise, as Dickens himself described the co-author relationship between Collins and himself as thus: "I am the Captain, . . . Mr. Collins is the Mate" (qtd. in Trodd 202). Anthea Trodd furthers this concept by describing the partnership as being "comradely yet hierarchical" (203). In other words, there is no question as to who controls the story: Dickens. Just as a shipmate is subordinate to the captain, Collins surrenders many of his own ideas to fit Dickens's desired mold. Dickens appears to have believed that British imperialism itself wasn't inherently wrong; instead, it was the motives of the British colonists that he seems to be critiquing. As Grace Moore explains, in his other writings Dickens "registers what has not yet been established in 'our own civilised land' and attacks the cultural and racial arrogance of Britain's attempts to spread her flawed version of civilization across the globe" (71). Here, Dickens doesn't appear to be promoting the failures of Victorian England's culture, or the spread of those failures to its colonies. Instead, he wants to extend the best parts of British civilization, including religion especially. According to Hai Na, this doesn't necessarily mean that Dickens advocates the spread of any particular religious institution. In reference to a sample of Dickens's writing, Na argues, "It tells us what Dickens deems irrelevant, namely institutions and dogmas; it emphasizes the importance of human beings who do not preach, but illustrate live religious truths" (132).

Dickens seems less occupied with bringing a church to the colonies, and much more concerned about bringing Christian values and truths.

Throughout the text, it becomes clear that the English are Dickens's "human beings who . . . illustrate live religious truths" as they face opposition. Consider Miss Maryon's comment when she signs the pirate captain's letter: "We are still in the hands of God, and the future which His wisdom has appointed will not the less surely come" (Collins and Dickens 47). In a time of acute stress, Miss Maryon acknowledges God and His hand in whatever may happen to the captives, as opposed to despairing and losing all hope. Additionally, Captain Carton asserts that he holds his "commission by the allowance of God, and not . . . direct from the Devil," (Collins and Dickens 24). This implies that Carton not only believes in a higher power, but also that it is his duty to honor God through serving in the capacity of military leader. These statements from the English characters suggest that the English are faithful Christians, despite the absence of any source of religious authority, such as the institution of a church. Without such a source of religious authority, it becomes clear that the religiosity of the English is determined by their own actions. Religion is shown to be deeply connected to the other positive qualities, like perseverance, that the English characters possess, such as when the English escape on the rafts and Gill states, "While we humbly resigned ourselves to going down, if it was the will of Our Father that was in Heaven, we humbly made up our minds, that we would all do the best that was in us" (Collins and Dickens 92). The English were willing to accept the will of God, but they were also willing to exert all efforts necessary; their religiosity gives them the moral high ground. "For Dickens," Na elaborates, "to be religious means to have the willpower to make a choice instead of simply drifting" (140). The English are consistently put into situations in which

they can choose to alter their situation, such as whether to escape the pirates and chart their own course down the river, or to simply drift aimlessly in the hope of rescue.

Aside from the English, however, none of the characters are shown to have religiosity; instead, they are presented not only as morally inferior to the English, but racially as well. The English call Christian George King, the “Sambo” pilot, by bigoted names even before he proves to be disloyal to them. For example, when Christian George King expresses happiness that the pirates were “escaping” and begins to dance with glee, Gill implores “that cannibal” to “hold his noise” (Collins and Dickens 25). Similarly, the pirates Christian George King collaborates with are referred to as the “scum of all nations,” even “the worst men in the world” (Collins and Dickens 99). The pirates are not simply bad guys, they are bad guys from various nations. This suggests that they are not only amoral characters, but racially inferior as well. They are described as being less like people, and more otherworldly as “the howling, murdering, black-flag waving, mad, and drunken crowd of devils . . .” (Collins and Dickens 99). The Indians as a group are not portrayed any more kindly than Christian George King or the pirates. Collins introduces the Indians’ village as a “wretched place,” where the “savages squatted about, jumped to their feet in terror as we came in view; but, seeing the Indians at the head of our party, took heart, and began chattering and screeching, just like the parrots we had left in the forest” (61). By showing the Indians as backward and animalistic, the English characters appear to be civilized and better. Grace Moore argues this concept further by indicating that these racial “others” are in a “state that other characters fear and resist lapsing into” (67). Indeed, none of the English characters need to fear lapsing into such a state, because they are in a position of control. As a group, they view themselves as superior to the sundry other groups of people on the island.

Christian George King stands out as the earliest example of the racial “other” in connection to religiosity, as Gill and the others maintain a level of ideological control over him. This use of a character from a different ethnic background against whom other characters measure themselves can be found in Dickens’s other works, as indicated by Moore: “The Native [from Dickens’s *Dombey and Son*], though, holds a wider importance as a subordinate figure whose presence permits those normally lacking in power, such as servants, the ability to label him and to define themselves against him” (65). Gill, a marine, came from even humbler experiences. In fact, his own circumstances are not at all unlike those of Christian George King. Neither of them have parents or families (that we are aware of, in Christian George King’s case). They are both subordinates in the social hierarchy, and neither of them have received the benefits of wealth or education. In spite of these striking similarities, Gill personally assesses his own worth and defines his own position based on how he is different from Christian George King. From the beginning, Gill states, “I should have kicked Christian George King--who was no more a Christian, than he was a King, or a George--over the side . . .” (7). It is important to note here that Gill is taking umbrage with the fact that the Sambo pilot’s first name was Christian, and yet he was not nominally Christian. Furthermore, Gill appears to be associating Christianity closely, if not inseparably, with essential aspects of the English culture, such as the king or a common name. This being the case, at least part of the reason Gill sees himself as better when compared to Christian George King is because of his own religiosity. Consider how the relationship between the English and Christian George King only sours as it becomes apparent that Christian George King was solely imitating the Christian value of trustworthiness that the English esteemed so highly. After betraying their trust, and therefore showing a lack of Christian qualities, Christian George King is simply described as being “evil-minded” (Collins and

Dickens 42). Although his name is Christian, he is not Christian by name or by action, no matter how hard he tries to mimic the values associated with Christianity.

In a similar manner, the pirate captain, Don Pedro, is depicted as racially inferior to the English in due to his sham religiosity. Despite the fact that Don Pedro is Portuguese, and obviously well-educated, he fails to reach a higher rung on the social hierarchy that is level with the English characters. The English have no respect for Don Pedro, whom they perceive as primal and animalistic, as illustrated by his portrayal as a “little, active, weazen, monkey-faced man” (Collins and Dickens 41). Collins continues to describe him as being “uglier, meaner, [and] weaker” than any other human being (42). Even Don Pedro’s call to march is a shriek is compared to that of a cat (Dickens and Collins 53). As a primary villain, the pirate captain, in some respects, represents Moore’s argument that Dickens’s “view of evil was individual rather than institutional” (71). After all, Don Pedro is described as being singularly terrible, a sentiment well-conveyed through Gill’s comrade, Tom Packer: “I can stand a good deal, . . . but confound me, Davis, if it’s not a trifle too much to be taken prisoner by such a fellow as that” (Collins and Dickens 53). However, it may be more accurate to say that Don Pedro individually represents an evil institution: fake religiosity. Natalie Bell Cole refers to this fake religiosity by addressing Dickens’s concerns regarding “theatricality contesting with earnestness” (Cole 205). If any character in *The Perils* is guilty of putting on theatrical displays of religiosity rather than being earnestly religious, it is Don Pedro. When Collins introduces Don Pedro, he describes him as wearing a flamboyant, even theatrical, ensemble, including “a thick gold chain, with a diamond cross hanging from it” (41). Don Pedro wears the most widely recognized symbol of Christianity, but ultimately to him, it is merely for show. If anything, his diamond-encrusted cross represents his true motives: wealth and power. Those motives are made even more

apparent when the pirates and their captives finally arrive at the ruined Indian palace. The English had just been commenting on the horror of the ancient idols, so perhaps it is no coincidence, then, that Don Pedro sets himself up as a sort of idol when he proclaims, “I myself, because my soul is big, shall live alone in this grand hall” (Collins and Dickens 68). Unlike the English, he never acknowledges a higher power. For him, all of his success comes from his own strength. Instead of giving praise, he seeks praise.

Unlike Don Pedro or Christian George King, the Indians are religious, and yet they are still below the English on the social hierarchical ladder. They are described as “savages,” and only being useful for providing food (Collins and Dickens 71). Their ultimate “otherness,” however, is at its pinnacle when the English encounter the ancient ruins for the first time. Their initial encounter with the idol is terrifying to the children and disturbing to the rest; the idol is described to be “a hideous monster carved in stone, “ and “its body and the flat space of spare stone which rose above its head, were all covered with mysterious devices--little grinning men’s faces, heads of crocodiles and apes . . .” (Collins and Dickens 63). The idol represents an ancient religion, but to the English, it represents a lack of Christianity, something to be feared rather than revered. As Said points out, “The Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other” (5). Again, while Silver-Store and the South American continent, are not part of the “Orient,” they are being colonized and the native peoples are stereotyped in much the same fashion. In this case, the English are defining themselves as moral Christians in contrast to the history and religion of the ancient inhabitants of the island. This is problematic, of course, because the native peoples never have the opportunity to share that history. This issue becomes most apparent when Miss Maryon says,

“I believe we are close to the remains of one of those mysterious ruined cities which have long been supposed to exist in this part of the world” (64). In this case, Miss Maryon is demonstrating the concept that the English were constructing this fantastic, “mysterious,” even mythical culture for the island that was in direct contrast to, and therefore defining, British culture. The English characters’ reality is the opposite of the fantasy of the “other.” The British characters are holding ideological control over the Indians because they are imposing their own view of the Indians’ culture upon them. Said describes this situation as “the result of cultural hegemony at work” (7). As the English characters insist on viewing the Indians through their own filtered perceptions, they only see uncivilized, and un-Christian peoples. Therefore, the lack of Christian religiosity in the Indians allows the English to perpetuate the racial inferiority of the Indians.

At the conclusion of the story, the perceived racial inferiority and the absence of religiosity in the non-English characters brings about their downfall. Christian George King is murdered as a “traitor and a spy” (Collins and Dickens 106). The majority of the pirates are executed, and the rest imprisoned. The Indians fade back into the shadows of the forest. The English win. They are ultimately given a victory because they were good, and their goodness was determined by their religiosity. Being Christian, and acting accordingly, only supports their mindset of English racial superiority. The English are put in “a whole series of possible relationships . . . without ever losing [them] the upper hand” (Said 7). Christianity is being associated with the very best of English civilization, according to Dickens’s beliefs. The ideologies of racism and religiosity, then, are deeply interconnected, and clearly difficult to separate, as demonstrated by the characters and their clashing cultures in *The Perils*.

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