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English Prisoners in their Unnatural Habitat: Conquering Nature in *The Perils of Certain English Prisoners* by Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens is most famous for writing about urban spaces and environments such as the city of London. However, as Joseph Carroll points out, there are numerous "prominent British depictions of wild nature" and these depictions of nature find their way into the "cultivated tracts of British domestic fiction" (305). It is this relationship, between the cultivated and uncultivated wilderness that Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins touch upon in their collaborative 1857 Christmas novella, *The Perils of Certain English Prisoners, and Their Treasure in Women, Children, Silver, and Jewels*. Collins and Dickens explore the relationship between humans and nature as they tell the dynamic story of how the English prisoners and the pirates interact with each other and with their environment. The story of *Perils*, which takes place on the colonized island of Silver-Store, just off of the Mosquito coast, provides a lot of opportunity for Dickens and Collins to tell the story of the "certain English prisoners" with what John Miller calls an "colonial-ecological gesture" in their novella (484). This "colonial-ecological gesture" is indicative that Dickens and Collins are intentional in how they create relationships in *Peril* between nature and facets of colonialism. Additionally, Troy Boone reasons that because Dickens was mainly an "urban novelist", we might have a tendency to focus on the social aspects of his writings; instead of focusing on just the character or setting, Boone maintains that an "inhabitants-in-environment" is the best way to analyze a Dickens novel so that

each aspect is just as important as the other. Looking at *The Perils* with the mindset that Dickens and Collins write this novel with the environment in mind, and considering that the English prisoners and other characters are the "inhabitants" makes it easy to see the effects of nature throughout the novella. Specifically, Dickens and Collins present the idea of success being linked to subduing or conquering nature in *Perils*, a nineteenth-century novella because we see the pirates and the English prisoners as Victorians doing what Victorians do: conquering and colonizing the island of Silver-Store. But if we look closely, *Perils* suggests that in order to be successful, the prisoners actually have to succumb to nature. This suggests that *Perils* is calling into question the effectiveness of the colonialist mindset of conquering nature.

The English people in *Perils* believe that they can conquer nature and that they must do so in order to be successful Victorian colonists. Miller asserts that the English colonists are on the island to transform the wilderness into civility and he reinforces this assertion with his discussion of how the postcolonial mindset led to a "nature/culture dyad" (477). This binary of nature and culture is an explanation as to why the English give so many faithful attempts at conquering their habitat. Furthermore, Miller supports Dickens's portrayal of the English as Victorian colonists when he argues that "Empire for Victorian Britain *means* a specific kind of *environmental* process, taming the savage landscape and bringing it into the pale of British productivity" (483). The English on Silver-Store fulfill the role of conquerors and colonizers as they construct buildings like "a powder magazine" in order to store "the silver [that] was brought from the mine. . . from the mainland" (Collins and Dickens 11). In order to build, the English must cut down trees, hack their way through vines and overgrowth, and change the natural landscape so that they can accommodate the construction. By physically taking control over the mine from the

mainland and creating buildings on the island of Silver-Store, the English gain control, establish supremacy, and "tame the savage landscape" of Silver-Store (Miller 483).

Similarly, the pirates believe that they, too, can conquer nature and that by doing so, they will be successful and powerful. The main example of this can be seen in the pirate captain, Don Pedro, as he has a plan to reside (with the English prisoners) in the great palace in the middle of the forest. It appears that there is no motive for Don Pedro to move the prisoners and his pirate comrades far from all other civilization and reside in an abandoned palace. However, the evidence in *Perils* suggests Don Pedro wants to have a place where he can feel like he is in control of everything and where he can have "one eyes always on [his] prisoners, and the other eye always on [his] guard outside" (Collins and Dickens 68). For Don Pedro, control equates to success because by asserting dominance over nature, he is able to determine the outcomes of what happens to him, his fellow pirates and his prisoners, the English. The ability for Don Pedro to isolate himself with his little kingdom only happens because the abandoned palace is remote enough and big in order for him to have a place that will accommodate his "big soul and little body" (Collins and Dickens 69). Don Pedro also makes plans to transform the palace into his "strong castle of retreat" and he proceeds to order the English prisoners to aid him in this endeavor (Collins and Dickens 73). Although the palace is a constructed building, it is so "choked up by fallen stones" and "so girt about by roots and climbing plants, that no force short of a blast of gunpowder, could possibly have dislodged them (Collins and Dickens 66). Additionally, Don Pedro's mindset that nature is under his control is illustrated when he tells the prisoners that if they try to escape and if his bullet misses them, then they will "starve to death in forests that have no path and no end" (Collins and Dickens 52). What Don Pedro means by this, is that he believes nature is his second-bullet or his backup plan to kill the prisoners. Don Pedro's

mind is so set on gaining control that he assumes nature is on his side and that his plans are in accordance with those of the environment. Therefore, we see that although Don Pedro wants to take control of the palace and although he assumes that nature is his ally, he will have to overcome the forces of nature in order to do (and prove) that it is so. It is clear from the examples that Dickens and Collins provide us with, that Don Pedro believes gaining control over nature equates to him being successful.

Much like Don Pedro, the English prisoners are eager to master nature on Silver-Store; however, they are not successful in their attempts. For example, the prisoners build a "sort of barrack" and a "walled square of building" but it is not in the heart of the forest like the palace. In order to build anything on the beach of Silver-Store, the prisoners would have had to cut down trees, clear vines, find materials for their construction, etc. The fact that they had to cut down and clear nature from their path in order to set up shop on the island proves that they are guests or intruders, not masters over nature. The prisoners merely claim to control of the silver mine on the mainland but it is actually something that they stole from those living there on the Mosquito Coast. The English also possess a small fort on the beach which again shows that they really haven't conquered nature, they've only set up camp, so to speak (Collins and Dickens 9). In fact, Dickens even describes the English as going "down to the beach, to be friendly with the boat's crew who were camped and hutted there" (Collins and Dickens 12). This quotes shows that the English sailors stayed on the beach, which makes sense considering they were mending the boat, but it also demonstrates that they didn't have to cut down any trees or conquer the natural landscape that much, if at all.

Just as the English are unsuccessful in their attempts to conquer nature, the pirates also fail to demonstrate domination over the "savage landscape" (Miller 483). Collins shows that the

attempt at control over the palace by Don Pedro is thwarted by the "straight, naked trunk of a beautiful tree, that shot high above the ruins" (67). A simple tree that grows inside the palace and "its enormous branches" that are like "plumes of immense green feathers" becomes the real sign of power in the palace (Collins and Dickens 67). The description of the tree is majestic and grandiose which shows that although the palace is large, nature surrounds and surpasses the building in the hierarchy of Silver-Store. What the pirates, especially Don Pedro, think is their property (or ally) is actually ruled by nature itself as it completely covers the inside of the palace. In *Perils*, Dickens and Collins make it clear that nature is more powerful than the palace, the prisoners, and the pirates.

While both the pirates and the prisoners failed, the Indians, although not prominent characters in the text, seem to have a different and more symbiotic relationship with nature than the prisoners and pirates do. The Indians live in a village in the forest and although the English prisoners observe their abode as "a wretched place, made up of two rows of huts built with mud" with "roofs thatched. . . with palm leaves", the Indians at least have a permanent residence among the vines and overgrowth of the forest (Collins and Dickens 61). The Indians are described by Collins as being curious and idle as they follow the prisoners on their march through the forest and help to hack away at the "bushes and shrubs, and at the wild vines and creepers" (59, 63). Gill, the narrator, says that "the Indians[']. . . only business at the Palace was to supply us [the prisoners] with food from the village" and that when they were done they "left the ruins in a body, at the usual trot of those savages when they are travelling in a hurry" (Collins and Dickens 71). This quotation signifies to the English prisoners, that the Indians acted differently than the English and that they seemed to blend in with nature. Collins also hints at the barbaric nature of the Indians when he compares them to "parrots" that were "chattering and

screeching" when they recognized each other in the forest (61). Although the English prisoners look down on the native Indians and describe them as animalistic because they travel "in a body" and live in their village in the forest (Collins and Dickens 71), the Indians actually claim control over nature as they cooperate with it in an effort to survive. The village that the Indians have managed to construct is a prime example of the unified relationship that they have with nature. It is with the example of the Indians and their village that Dickens and Collins show how true success can be attained: through collaboration with nature instead of solely exerting force over it.

In the end of the *Perils of Certain English Prisoners*, Dickens shows how the English prisoners start to understand that conquering nature does not necessarily equate to success. Until now, the English prisoners and pirates have been unsuccessful in their efforts to prove their power by conquering nature. When the prisoners start to view nature as an ally, rather than a force to be overcome, they become more successful and are able to complete their escape. The prisoners align themselves with nature through their escape as they rely on environmental factors to help them free the grip of Don Pedro and his group. The prisoners were not able to overtake the pirates in a large battle on a beach, or establish their own settlement in the forest: they merely used the river to float away and out of sight. This small victory, however, is key in the way that we read Dickens's and Collins's *Perils* with an "inhabitants-in-environment" mindset, as Boone suggests (101). They use the river, the berries, the trees, and the wildness of the environment/nature to aid them in their escape. The river itself puts a "notion" into Short's head to make rafts out of the trees that the prisoners have been commanded to cut down (Collins and Dickens 74). Collins creates the plot of the escape and in every detail, nature's hand is seen: down to the "lashings" of "stout vines and creepers" (75). In effect, the English even used the wild vines that were growing to create a way in which they could tie their rafts together. Collins

also describes a scene where an English child attempts to eat a berry and Mr. Kitten stops the child and explains that if one was to eat the berries, they would fall into a “deep sleep—a sleep that would make your [the child’s] mama think you [the child] were dead” (Collins and Dickens 79). This scene in *Perils* gives Lady Maryon the idea to use the berries to poison the pirates into a "deep sleep", which can be achieved by putting a little bit of the poison into the food of the pirates (Collins and Dickens 79). The prisoners put the juice of the berries into the tortillas and drug the pirates so that they end up in a "drugged sleep" (Collins and Dickens 84). After the prisoners use the berries to escape from the pirates, they head to the banks of the river where they "cast off" and "floated away, a company of free people, on the current of an unknown river" (Collins and Dickens 90). Dickens demonstrates how the river was such a driving force in the way that the English interacted with their environment and in the way that they use it in their escape; he says "it drove us to this bank, and it drove us to that bank, and it turned us, and whirled us; but yet it carried us on. Sometimes much too slowly; sometimes much too fast, but yet it carried us on" (Collins and Dickens 92). This quotation implies that although the English prisoners were certainly not in control of nature, they relied on it to be of aid to them in their escape. Although the prisoners are utilizing nature, they are still at the mercy of it; especially because the "off-settings and point-currents of the stream, made the likelihood of [their] being drowned. . .as broad and plain as the noonday sun" (Collins and Dickens 91) But this doesn't mean that they're unsuccessful: only that they must be cautious in how they go about their trip down the river. In this manner, the prisoners use the environment (trees, river, berries, etc.) to make their escape from the pirates and change the way in which they interact with nature.

A biologist and naturalist, Ernst Haeckel "saw ecology as offering an explanation of the world through relationality, continuity, and ultimately, unity" (qtd. in Parkins and Adkins 1).

Dickens and Collins capture this unity with nature in the *Perils of Certain English Prisoners* as their English prisoners evolve towards a more harmonious relationship with nature rather than maintaining their Victorian mindset of colonizing and conquering. Wendy Parkins and Peter Adkins support the shift that Dickens and Collins make in *Perils* from conqueror to collaborator as they point out that there was a "radical refiguring of the human relationship with the environment in the Victorian period" (13). This "refiguring" is echoed by Dickens and Collins as they write about the phenomena of the developing "human relationship with the environment" in *Perils* (Parkins and Adkins 13). This changing relationship with the environment/nature was a huge part of the nineteenth century and is reflected in *Perils* by Dickens and Collins. Whereas the pirates and prisoners both start off as conquerors, they eventually realize that the jungle and island of Silver-Store are not conquerable, at least in the way that they originally thought. The prisoners and the pirates both experience attempts at conquering nature and it appears that the English learned, in the end, a more successful way of coexisting with their environment. Although the entire story of *Perils* appears to be rooted in the concepts of control and domination, Dickens and Collins use the example of the Indians (and eventually the prisoners themselves) to prove that true success can come when the "inhabitants" pay more attention to their "environment" (Boone 101).

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