H. Rider Haggard

Introduction

"From the east to the west sped the angels of the Dawn, from sea to sea, from mountain-top to mountain-top, scattering light with both their hands." - She, by H. Rider Haggard

She: A History of Adventure by H. Rider Haggard helped create the genre of Lost World fiction. It was published serially between 1886 and 1887. Each section is characterized by a picture depicting a scene from each section and a cliffhanger at the end to keep the readers interested. By 1965, 83 million copies of this book were sold, immortalizing the complex Victorian mentality toward exploration, race, empire, and gender for generations to come.

For other information on a modern adaptation of this author and other Victorian works, see the Alan Moore Wiki, featuring The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen Vol. 1.

This Wiki provided to you by: Lawson, Kery; Mims, Kelsey; Ryan, Katherine; and Stevenson, Rachel

Topics for Discussion

The Frame Narrative - How many "frames" does the novel go through before we read the main story? How many characters, or hands, does this pass through? How does this affect the story? How one reads the story? Are we more or less likely to believe Holly's story?

The Femme Fatale - How does Holly describe Ayesha? What kinds of characteristics does he attribute to her? What does this have in common with Victorian commentaries on women?

Representation of Africans and Africa - How are these people described? Where are they hierarchically placed in comparison to the English visitors? What comparisons does Holly make when describing them? their culture? their traditions?

Colonialism/Imperialism - What types of cultural clashes were described? What comes of this culture clash between the Africans and the English? What do the "conquering" English see in the Africans? How does Ayesha treat the Africans?

Age/Time - In what ways does Ayesha's long life challenge Darwin's theory of natural law? What is the motivation behind her desire for long life? Why does Holly challenge her view of time?

Love - What about the relationship between Holly and Leo makes it a homoerotic love affair? In what way does Haggard turn love into a commentary about African culture?

Beauty - In what ways do Leo and Ayesha treat their individual beauty? How does this difference attract one to the other and Holly to both of them?

Law - What problems are caused by Ayesha's word being the only law of the land? What happens when her laws conflict with Holly's colonialist attitude and the way he perceives Africa?

Religion - How does the way Ayesha view religion compare with the Victorians and why does she feel this way?

Form is Content


The Frame Narrative

"And so I may as well say at once that I am not the narrator but only the editor of this extraordinary history, and then proceed to tell how it found its way into my hands.... a month ago I received a letter and two packets, one of manuscript, and on opening the first found that it was signed by 'Horace Holly,' a name that at the moment was not familiar to me." Pages 35-36

In order to lend credibility to a fantastical story, H. Rider Haggard employs a frame narrative in She. The editor, unnamed, here recognizes that the narrative he is presenting is indeed "fantastical," but by suggesting that he is only the "editor," not the inventor, of the text, he lends a feeling of truth to the writing.
"Dear Sir,... We are, for reasons that you may be able to guess, after perusing this manuscript, going away again, this time to Central Asia, where, if anywhere upon this earth, wisdom is to be found, and anticipate that our sojourn there will be a long one. Possibly we shall not return. Under these altered conditions it has become a question of whether we are justified in withholding from the world an account of a phenomenon which we believe to be of unparalleled interest, merely because our private life is involved, or because we are afraid of ridicule and doubt being cast upon our statements." Page 37

This letter, an introduction to the manuscript that becomes the main text of the novel, provides the characters with a life outside the narrative. Rather than being merely fictional characters, Holly and Leo become Victorian heroes, adventurers off on another exploration. It also alludes to the unbelievable nature of the narrative, suggesting that Holly and Leo are releasing the story for the benefit of humanity, despite the fact that they face personal ridicule by doing so. Using this letter as a frame for his story, Haggard once again creates a heightened sense of realism in his novel.

The Femme Fatale

"The swathed mummy-like form before me was that of a tall and lovely woman, instinct with beauty in every part, and also with a certain snakelike grace that I have never seen anything like before. When she moved a hand or foot her entire frame seemed to undulate, and the neck did not bend, it curved." Page 143

This passage characterizes Ayesha as a femme fatale by comparing her to a serpent. In Western culture, the serpent is most often connected with the story of Adam and Eve as a symbol of temptation and their fall from perfection. Similarly, Ayesha serves as a temptation for both Holly and Leo, who, though they know she is evil, are drawn in by her beauty.

"Chiefly, however, I was haunted by that frightful piece of diablerie by which Ayesha left her finger marks upon her rival's hair. There was something so terrible about the swift, snake-like movement, and the instantaneously blanching of that three-fold line, that if the results had been much more tremendous, I doubt if they would have impressed me so deeply. To this day, I often dream of that dread scene, and see the weeping woman, bereaved, and marked like Cain, cast a last look at her lover, and creep from the presence of her dread Queen." Page 196

Holly uses a number of terms here that mark Ayesha as a femme fatale, as someone to be feared. He is "haunted" by this memory and "often [dreams] of that dread scene." He uses the term "dread" twice in this section, using it to describe both the scene and Ayesha herself. The phrase "frightful piece of diablerie" is especially telling, linking this moment to a feeling of undeniable evil. He again uses the snake reference, speaking of her "swift, snake-like movement."

Colonialism

"I was an Englishman, and why, I asked myself, should I creep into the presence of some savage woman as though I were a monkey in fact as well as in name? I would not and could not do it, that is, unless I was absolutely sure that my life depended upon it. If once I began to creep upon my knees I should always have to do so, and it would be a patent acknowledgement of inferiority." Page 141

Colonialism is an important theme of the novel, and this passage shows Holly's feelings of superiority to Ayesha, based solely on his English heritage. The use of the word "savage" to describe her makes it clear that Holly has little respect for other cultures and feels justified in his imposition of Western values on the Amahagger people. Additionally, the idea that he would always "creep upon [his] knees" once he began to do so demonstrates a feeling of being dehumanized by showing respect to this "savage" queen, and suggests that an assertion of his superiority is vital to maintain not only his pride but also his humanity.

"Gone are the quiet college rooms, gone the wind-swayed English elms and cawing rooks, and the familiar volumes on the shelves, and in their place there rises a vision of the great calm ocean gleaming in shaded silver lights beneath the beams of the full African moon. A gentle breeze fills the huge sail of our dhow, and draws us through the water than ripples musically against our sides." Page 67

Here Holly compares his English home life to that in Africa. Although in many parts of the novel, he describes Africa negatively, at this point, he is just beginning his journey, and uses such terms as "great calm ocean," "gentle breeze," and "shaded silver lights." Instead of a mere sight, Holly begins to explain the landscape with the words "there rises a vision." His description is romantic, and he is not afraid or threatened. This may be because he has come from the land of "wind-swayed English elms," and he understands that as an Englishman, they have already conquered this land. Africa, then, is not a separate country, but a place owned by England, where Englishmen can watch the sunset and have a pleasant day on the "great calm ocean."

Laws and Nature

"Ayesha locked up in her living tomb waiting from age to age for the coming of her lover worked but a small change in the order of the World... Thus she opposed herself against the eternal Law, and strong though she was, by it was swept back to nothingness, swept back with shame and hideous mockery." Page 264
Ayesha's defiance of natural and social laws is evident in this excerpt. Because she has lived an unnaturally long life, she has created her own system of laws, which Holly states opposes to natural law; he is appalled by her departure from the values that he holds.

"Hath it not been taught to ye from childhood that the law of She is an ever fixed law, and that he who breaketh it by so much as one jot or tittle shall perish? And is not my lightest word a law?" Page 196

As Ayesha has declared herself free from both natural law and the law of man, she has simultaneously become the source of law for the Amahagger people, and she declares her power in this quotation. She is characterized through this statement as being terrifying, suggesting that whoever breaks her "lightest word" "shall perish."

Representations of Africans and Africa

"There I sat and stared at them and at the silent circle of the fierce moody faces of the men, and reflected that it was all very awful, and that we were absolutely in the power of this alarming people, who, to me at any rate, were all the more formidable because their true character was still very much a mystery to us." Page 107

Holly's complete discomfort around and mistrust of the Africans he encounters is demonstrated in this description of them, with words like "fierce," "moody," and "alarming." This passage helps to reveal the source of this mistrust when Holly remarks that the Amahagger "were all the more formidable because their true character was still very much a mystery." Because he cannot see their "true character," or understand them, they are frightening.

"I took to be a baboon came hopping round the fire, and was instantly met upon the other side by a lion, or rather a human being dressed in a lion's skin. Then came a goat, then a man wrapped in an ox's hide, with the horns wobbling about in a ludicrous way...When all the beasts had collected they began to dance about in a lumbering, unnatural fashion, and to immitate the sounds produced by the respective animals they represented.” Page 205

In this passage Holly is relating the Amahagger people to animals, and through this comparison, demonstrating his feeling of superiority to the Amahagger. It is unclear in the passage where the boundary falls between human and animal. While the lion and ox are revealed to be human and the goat and baboon are assumed to be beast, the fact that the man in the lion skin is at first described as a beast brings into question whether the goat and monkey may be human. Additionally, Holly goes on to say "all the beasts," completely destroying the boundary between these Africans and animals while creating a clear distinction between he, a human, and the Amhagger.

Age and Time

"She was shrivelling up; the golden snake that had encircled her gracious form slipped over her hips and fell upon the ground; smaller and smaller she grew; her skin changed colour, and in place of the perfect whiteness of its lustre it turned dirty brown and yellow, like an old piece of withered parchment.” Page 261

She places a great deal of focus on the Ayesha's avoidance of natural laws, namely her ability to escape death. Ayesha's death resolves the conflict of her life outside of time, and this passage shows the natural effects of time physically catching up with her. The facade of the queen's beauty is torn away by age, and her true small, withered, brown form is revealed to Leo and Holly.

"Behold now, let the Dead and Living meet! Across the gulf of Time they still are one. Time has no power against Identity, though sleep the merciful hath blotted out the tablets of our mind, and with oblivion sealed the sorrows that else would hound us from life to life, stuffing the brain with gathered griefs till it burst in the madness of uttermost despair.”-Ayesha, Page 217

Ayesha expresses in this passage her purpose in extending her life: she hopes to be reunited with her lover, Kalikrates, by allowing time to overcome even his death. She believes that "Identity" has the ability to transcend death and time, and that Leo is the resurrection of her former lover. The idea that Ayesha has the power to escape mortality by manipulating time contributes to her fearfulness, as she escapes the natural law of time, to which the Westerners Leo and Holly are vulnerable.

Love

"One by one [the years] went by, and as they passed we two grew dearer and yet more dear to each other. Few sons have been loved as I love Leo, and few fathers know the deep and continuous affection that Leo bears to me.” Page 51

In the relationship between Leo and Ayesha, a man and a woman, is characterized as something that should be feared. Meanwhile, Leo's extremely close relationship with Holly is praised, with Holly calling it a "deep and continuous affection.” This theme of male homosocial erotics continues throughout the novel, and are much more permanent than the heterosexual relationships.
"There is love - love, which makes all things beautiful, yes, and breathes divinity into the very dust we tread. With love shall life roll on gloriously from year to year, like the voice of some great music that has power to hold the hearer's heart poised on eagles' wings above the sordid shame and folly of the earth."-Ayesha, Page 229

Ayesha's obsession with love drives her actions, including her decision to unnaturally extend her life. She alludes to this when she says that "With love shall life roll on gloriously from year to year," suggesting that it is the power of love, not her own decision-making, that has driven her to extreme action. She also suggests that she exists outside of and above society, stating that her heart is "poised on eagle's wings above the sordid shame and folly of the earth." While earth and its inhabitants are described with the words "shame" and "folly," the love that she experiences is "glorious" and "great."

"...I, a fellow of my college, noted for what my friends are pleased to call my misogyny, and a respectable man now well on in middle life, had fallen absolutely and hopelessly in love with this white sorceress. Nonsense; it must be nonsense! She had warned me fairly, and I had refused to take the warning. Curses on the fatal curiosity that is ever prompting man to draw the veil from a woman, and curses on the natural impulse that begets it!" Page 157

Here Holly paints love as a weakness, something that a "respectable man," a "fellow of [a] college" would never fail to. He is "hopelessly in love," and he reacts to this feeling by calling it "nonsense" and by cursing his "fatal curiosity." This is interesting, because to Holly, love both lacks meaning (nonsense) and is also fatal, which calls for a much more serious meaning. He calls Ayesha a "white sorceress" and views his feelings for her as an understandably cursed "natural impulse."

**Beauty**

I have heard of the beauty of celestial beings, now I saw it; only this beauty, with all its awful loveliness and purity, was evil — or rather, at the time, it impressed me as evil. How am I to describe it? I cannot — I simply cannot. Page 153

In *She*, beauty is characterized as something to be feared rather than trusted. While the intelligent, likeable narrator is compared to a monkey in the novel, Ayesha, the villainess and femme fatale, is radiantly beautiful. Holly narrates his gut reaction to her appearance in this passage, describing it as "evil" and "awful," and offering a moment of foreshadowing to Ayesha's behavior later in the story.

"And over all, the dead silence of the dead, the utter loneliness, and the brooding spirit of the past! How beautiful it was, and yet how drear! We did not dare to speak aloud. Ayesha herself was awed by the presence of an antiquity compared to which even her length of days was but a little thing..." Page 238

The controversy surrounding beauty is not limited to Ayesha. It also extends to the landscape. Here, beauty is a source of ambivalence, because in the midst of "the dead silence of the dead," Holly cannot help but remark on "How beautiful it was." In the same sentence, Holly uses the terms "beautiful" and "drear," terms which are seemingly mutually exclusive. What, then, is required of beauty? And what does that mean for our understandings of greater issues (i.e. life and death, in this instance)? He remarks, too, that "Ayesha herself was awed," suggesting that the logic of beauty is not only a mystery to him, but even to someone whose lifetime is much longer than his.

**Religion**

"I understand – two new religions! I have known so many, and doubtless there have been others since I knew aught beyond the caves of Kor. Mankind asks ever of the skies to vision out what lies behind them. It is this terror for the end, and but a subtler form of selfishness – this it is that religion breeds."-Ayesha, Page 183

Due to her extended lifespan, Ayesha has been able to observe religions over a number of centuries, watching as they rise to and fall from favor. While to a Westerner like Holly Christianity seems permanent and absolute, Ayesha suggests that religion comes from a "terror for the end," or need to believe in an afterlife, and attributes belief more to psychology than to deity. This portrayal of Ayesha as being outside of religion would have only served to make her more fearful for a Victorian reader, as it demonstrates her complete disconnect from Western religious values.

"'Now is my mood a happy mood, and filled am I with the purest part of thought, and so would I ever be. Therefore, Kallikrates, will I once more wash and make me clean, and yet more fit for thee. Therefore also, when thou dost in turn stand in the fire, empty all thy heart of evil, and let sweet contentment hold the balance of thy mind. Shake loose thy spirit's wings, and take thy stand upon the utter verge of holy contemplation..."" Page 259

Although Ayesha notably scoffs at religion, here in her speech to Leo, she plays on religious concepts, and even seeks refuge in some of the promises that religion makes. She talks of being "[washed] and [made] clean," which plays off of Christian theology, in the promise that Christ washes all souls clean. She talks also of evil and purity, which come from basic understandings of good and evil, a distinction of religious origin. She also talks of "thy spirit's wings," and uses the phrase "holy contemplation," which sounds like "holy communion." Ayesha's bathing in the fire with Lee, too, it is a twist on the communion, and perhaps baptism.
### Characters

**Ayesha**

The queen of the Amahagger, beautiful Ayesha has preserved herself for centuries through chemistry in order to be reunited with her lost love, Kallikrates, who she believes will return to her in a different form. A femme fatale, Ayesha is a mystery to the Westerners Leo and Holly, and as such is feared by them.

“This woman was very terrible.” Page 146

"Not even the lovely smile that crept about the dimples of her mouth could hide this shadow of sin and sorrow. It shone even in the light of the glorious eyes, it was present in the air of majesty, and it seemed to say: 'behold me now lovely as no woman was or is, undying and half divine; memory haunts me from age to age.” Page 153-54

**Leo Vincey**

Leo Vincey is the ward of Horace Holly and is the heir to a mysterious legacy. Ayesha believes he is Kallikrates and falls deeply in love with him. He is also married to Ustane, but leaves her behind to be with Ayesha. He is a capable hunter and although he is sick for most of the novel, it hinges on his appearances and the 2,000 year old bond between him and Ayesha.

“Leo at twenty-one might have stood for a statue of Apollo. I never saw anybody to touch him in looks, or anybody so absolutely unconscious of them. As for his mind he was brilliant and keen-witted but not a scholar.” Page 52

**Horace Holly**

The narrator of *She* and a Cambridge professor, he is called "Baboon" by Ayesha and Billali due to his appearance and wisdom. His love for both Leo and Ayesha complicates the journey but leads to a great adventure and a happy ending for the adventurers.

“Strong art thou, and ugly, but, if my wisdom be not at fault, honest at the core, and a staff to lean on”–Ayesha, Page 145

**Ustane**

Ustane is a member of the Amahagger tribe who chooses Leo as her husband. While she is characterized as being somewhat uncivilized, she is attributed with "redeeming" Western qualities, and serves as a link between Westerners and natives.

“After regarding him head to foot, the handsomest of the young women – one wearing a robe, and with hair of a shade between brown and chestnut – deliberately advanced to him, and, in a way that would have been winning had it not been so determined, quietly but her arm round his neck, bent forward, and kissed him on the lips.” Page 93

**Billali**

Holly refers to Billali as "father" as a way to show respect: he and Holly grow close over the course of the novel and Billali becomes Holly’s guide to the world of Kor and Ayesha. Billali is a "noble savage," similar to Ustane; the English rely on their knowledge and admire their morals, but still feel intellectually and culturally superior.

"He was a wonderful looking old man, with a snowy beard, so long that the ends of it hung over the sides of the litter, and he had a hooked nose, above which flashed a pair of eyes as keen as a snake’s, whilst his whole countenance was instinct with a look of wise and sardonic humor impossible to describe on paper.” Page 91

**Mahomed**

Mahomed is the native assigned to guide and work the boat that carries Leo, Holly, and Job. He is quickly killed off, demonstrating the lack of respect for other cultures, as is seen by the imperialist mentality of the author and his characters.

“A stout swarthy Arab, Mahomed by name, stands at the tiller, lazily steering by the stars.” Page 67

**Job**

Job was hired to care for Leo and has been with Leo and Holly since they became a family. He is loyal to Holly and Leo, demonstrates the isolated mentality of colonialist England, and exemplifies the class hierarchy present in the Victorian society.

“I succeeded in hiring a most respectable round-faced young man.” Page 50
Portrait

This image is available from the United States Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs Division under the digital ID ggbain.33688. (http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Henry_Rider_Haggard_02.jpg)
Biography

Dates: Born: June 22, 1856
Died: May 14, 1925, London nursing home

Hometown: West Bradenham, Norfolk, England

From a young age, H. Rider Haggard was pushed to be a writer by his parents. Haggard’s mother, Ella Doventon, was a poet and his father a barrister. He attended the Ipswich Grammar School, but his father did not feel that his progress was where it should have been. When he was nineteen, Haggard’s father sent him off to work as a secretary for Sir Henry Bulwer, lieutenant-governor of Natal. During this time, he accompanied Sir Theophilus Shepstone to the Transvaal where the fight for supremacy was taking place. In 1878 he became the Registrar of the High Court in the Transvaal. This time in Africa was the most influential time in his life for his novels. While in Africa, Haggard became acquainted with the Zulu culture, which helped him create his future novels. In 1880 Haggard married an Englishwoman and a year later they returned to England to start their life. They lived in Ditchingham, Norfolk, this is when he began his voyage into the literary world. He started writing his first book, Cetewayo and His White Numbers in 1882. In 1885 Haggard produced one of his most famous works, King Solomon’s Mines, and not long after that he produced his next famous work, She, in 1887. There were some accusations that Haggard had an affair with an African woman while he was on the continent. She in turn had a dramatic impact on how he portrayed is female characters in his novels. Haggard began to make a life for himself and his family off of his writing. This allowed him to spend time traveling the world. While in Mexico in 1891 Haggard’s only son died suddenly. This broke Haggard’s heart and left him with a sense of guilt for the rest of his life. He continued to write books, most of which had political statements in the background. In 1919 he was made a Knight Commandor of the Order of the British Empire. On May 14, 1925, Haggard passed away in London nursing home.

Reviews

These links to late 19th and early 20th-century articles feature reviews of She (along with plays based on She and its sequel, Ayesha), commentaries on H. Rider Haggard, magazine advertisements, and "pop-culture" references to Haggard's work.

These articles (and MORE!) can be found on the British Periodicals Database.

1880s
1. “She.” *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 63.1628 (January 8, 1887): 44.


1890s


1900s


1910s


1920s


Resources and Links

English Literature and Critical Resources

1. British Periodicals
2. British Newspapers
3. MLAB: MLA International Bibliography [For help navigating the MLAB, click here!]
4. Literature Criticism Online
5. Oxford English Dictionary
6. MLA Formatting and Style Guide (OWL at Purdue)

7. MLA Help (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign)

Critical Essays, Journal Articles, and Books


The Femme Fatale


Representations of Africans and Africa


Colonialism/Imperialism


**Age/Time**


**Love**


**Beauty**


**Religion**

Burdett, Carolyn. "Romance, Reincarnation and Rider Haggard."

Coates, John D. "The 'Spiritual Quest' in Rider Haggard's *She* and *Ayesha*." *Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens* 57 (April 2003): 13-14. 33-54.


**Further Applications of H. Rider Haggard's *She***

**Movie Adaptations of *She* on IMDb:**

**Trailer from 1935 movie adaptation**
Additional Materials

Other Works By H. Rider Haggard

1. *Ayesha: The Return of She e-Book*
2. *Nada the Lily e-Book*
3. *King Solomon’s Mines e-Book*


More Biographical Materials

2. The Literature Network
3. Encyclopaedia Britannica
4. Fantastic Fiction
5. The Free Library

Image Gallery

This image taken from http://www.luminous-lint.com/app/vexhibit/_PHOTOGRAPHER_Herbert_Rose_/69157123311406938443/
Randolph Scott played Leo Vincey in the 1935 movie version of "She." This is a screenshot from the "Follow the Fleet" (1936) trailer. 

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