

Representing the World Instead of
Reproducing It: M. P. Shiel's
The Purple Cloud

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It is not possible for any man to see all things in his lifetime
[...] but God has given us a way to be able to represent them.

André Thevet, *André Thevet's North America*

M. P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* was published in London in 1901, just as the Second Boer War was beginning to undermine Britain's confidence in the Empire, and the vigour and self-esteem of the New Imperialism kindled by Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1897 was gradually losing ground. At the same time, what we now call science fiction (a term that came into common usage in the 1920s), was establishing itself as a genre in its own right.¹ When Shiel's novel, which deals with the last-man-on-earth theme, was first serialized in the *Royal Magazine*, it caused "considerable stir, for it was the first recent work of its sort on the same level of quality as the scientific romances of H. G. Wells" (Bleiler 32). In his introduction to a recent edition of *The Purple Cloud*,² distinguished critic John Clute calls Shiel's work "the first great work of the science fiction century" (vi).

Coming out of the 'Age of Empires,' science fiction has been defined as "the expression of the subconscious aspect of [the] official ideology" of "Empire-forming" (Roberts 65). I will argue that, in *The Purple Cloud*, this "subconscious aspect" is articulated, explored, and foregrounded side by side with the ideological constructions and representations that it seems to be replicating. The very nature of science fiction, the fact that it "seeks to *represent* the world instead of *reproducing* it" (Delany 123, emphasis added) has been crucial in encouraging authors of the past to deal *then* with themes and topics that *now* preoccupy postcolonial authors and theorists and in inspiring them to investigate in their works

the process by which imperial/colonial discourse defines civilization and creates its “others”. As we shall see, Shiel’s investigation is no exception.

Shiel was a typical *fin-de-siècle bohémien* and eccentric writer: he lived mainly in London and Paris and his entourage included figures such as Oscar Wilde, Ernest Dowson, and Robert Louis Stevenson. Shiel, though, was eccentric in another, important way: he was born on the island of Montserrat, in the West Indies, in 1865. His father, a lay Methodist preacher and a shipowner, was of Irish ancestry and his mother was a free slave mulatto. When Shiel reached the age of fifteen, his father had him crowned king of the small isle of Redonda by the Methodist bishop of Antigua. Despite Britain’s decision to claim Redonda as its own in 1872, Shiel remained king of the island (whose inhabitants were mainly birds and a handful of guano collectors) until his death, when he left it to John Gawsorth. In his autobiographical essay, “About Myself,” Shiel seems proud of his Caribbean origins (“I name myself a native of the West Indies” (1)) but rather ambivalent with regard to his royal status and coronation:

this notion that I am somehow the King, King of Kings, and the Kaiser of Imperial Caesar, was so inveterately suggested to me, that I became incapable of expelling it. [...] it would have been better if my people had been more reasonable here; nor can I forgive myself now for the solemnity and dignity with which I figured in that show. (2)

As a son of a white man and a free slave mulatto, Shiel would have been classified, by the strict racial codifications of the time, a Quarteron (6/8 White, 4/8 Negro-Fair).³ However, his father’s Irishness complicates the matter further since, after the 1860s, it was a “popular assumption” that “certain physical and cultural features of the Irish marked them as a race of ‘Celtic Calibans’ quite distinct from the Anglo-Saxons” (McClintock 52). Because of his own origins, therefore, Shiel decentres what Balutansky and Sourieau define as “Europe’s academic rhetoric of (unitary) identity [and its] obsession with linear origin” and most importantly “Europe’s obsession with ‘being’ as a stable category of integrity and purity, resulting directly from its concepts of ethnic dif-

ference and racial classification as well as from its sense of a God-given right to dominate the inferior ‘other’”(3).

So it is not surprising that both ambiguity and eccentricity are crucial to *The Purple Cloud*. The book begins with an introduction in which a narrator (who calls himself “the writer”) reveals that he had received four notebooks of “shorthand” “scribbled in pencil, and without vowels,” from a friend, Dr. Arthur Lister Browne (5). The notebooks record fifteen years of hypnosis therapy with Browne’s patient, the late Mary Wilson. While in a state of trance, Dr. Browne writes, Miss Wilson “would emit a stream of sounds—I could hardly call it *speech*—murmurous, guttural, mixed with puffy breath-sounds at the languid lips” (7). The material that makes up *The Purple Cloud* is a transcription of notebook III, corresponding to the eleventh year of her treatment. Interestingly, it is not the fruit of Miss Wilson’s mind: as she specifies, idiosyncratically identifying her trance-self as “us,” “us read, another writes” (9). “Another” is Adam, the central narrative’s first person narrator, who keeps a (discontinuous) diary of the first twenty years of his personal odyssey. To complicate the matter further, at the core of Adam’s journal we find an extract from the diary of yet another character, Albert Tissu, a Frenchman who witnesses the emergence of the purple cloud from a new-born land in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. More ambiguously still, we cannot be sure of what is reported since Adam reads the diary with “some difficulty, for it was pen-written in French, and discoloured” (182).

This heterogeneity of authors/narrators and the difficulties imposed by the necessity for translation seem both to displace authority and to mock and defy “Europe’s academic rhetoric of (unitary) identity [and its] obsession with linear origin” (Balutansky and Sourieau 3). The heterogeneous structure of *The Purple Cloud* is even more interesting in the light of Firdous Azim’s claim:

The birth of the novel coincided with the European colonial project [...] concerned with the construction of a universal and homogeneous subject.[...] The novel is an imperial genre [...]

in its formal structure—in the construction of that narrative voice which holds the narrative structure together. (30)

As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reminds us, “it should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England’s social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English” (243).

On one level, *The Purple Cloud* can be read as a very Anglocentric novel reinforcing the centre/margin dichotomy typical of the Empire: *history*—actually, nothing less than the end of the world—is a result of decisions taken in London and of deeds perpetrated by English people. Far from being the moral centre of the Empire, however, London/England is the root of evil and corruption: after all, the destructive purple cloud that gives the novel its title is a consequence of the greediness of a group of Londoners. Mary Wilson’s story, moreover, is actually a prediction of events that are to take place in the future, but Shiel’s contemporaries were invited to relocate her story into their (imperial) time: “the words form the substance of a document to be written, or to be motived (according to Miss Wilson), in that future, which, no less than the Past, substantially exists in the Present—though, like the Past, we see it not” (9). As Roberts emphasizes, science fiction “does not project us into the future; it relates to us stories about our present, and more importantly about the past that has led to this present. Counter-intuitively, [science fiction] is a *historiographic* mode, a means of symbolically writing about history” (35-36). Significantly, in the novel, Dr. Browne affirms that, while in a trance, Mary Wilson could recite the whole of Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: from the very beginning, therefore, we are offered an indication that the main concern of the novel is actually imperialism and its history.

But whose concern is it? Is it Adam’s, whose journal “us” reads while in a trance? Or the sick Miss Wilson’s? Or that of Doctor Browne who, under the effect of morphia, reveals to his friend that he has transcribed Miss Wilson’s murmurous, guttural “stream of sounds”? Or is it the concern of the “writer” who deciphered the short-handed manuscript

scribbled without vowels and decided to publish and edit only one out of four notebooks? Or is it Shiel's? Or, ultimately, Shiell's? (Shiel was born Shiell and decided to drop the second "l" when he first started publishing.) This is one of the challenges initially offered to the readers of this eccentric text, challenges made distinctly more interesting to later critics who are able, retrospectively, to position the novel within late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century imperial history.

The "historical" event that provides the impetus for the narrative itself is the "discovery" of the North Pole. Of course, when *The Purple Cloud* was written, the North Pole had not yet been reached by Europeans (it would happen in 1909): for most of the nineteenth century its discovery represented the ultimate human achievement (somewhat like landing on the moon in the 1960s), and the Pole itself was seen as a symbolically mysterious place. The polar expedition described in the novel leaves from London and is motivated by more than the "noble" desire to explore new places: a prize of \$175 million is offered by an American millionaire to the first man to reach the Pole. An ambitious woman, Countess Clodagh, does not hesitate to poison her nephew, initially chosen as the expedition's scientist, in order to give her fiancé, Adam Jeffson, physicist and botanist, a chance to join the team. Despite his admittedly tardy condemnation of Clodagh's behaviour, Adam is a tainted hero, motivated by a mixture of greed, pride, and lust, and, on his way to the Pole, he actually kills two members of the expedition before reaching it alone. Ironically, though, he will never be able to claim his reward because his profanation/discovery of the Pole somehow, mysteriously, initiates an eruption of hydrocyanic gas in the form of a purple cloud that kills the entire human race except for, it seems, initially at least, Adam.

If profit is behind Clodagh's, Adam's, and his companions' actions, it was also the driving force behind imperialism. Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897 "crystallized the new conception of Empire and made people feel they were part of some properly organized working unit": cheering crowds came from all corners of Victoria's gigantic Empire to wave flags at the procession, described by *The Times* as a "wonderful [...] exhibition of allegiance and brotherhood amongst so

many myriads of men” (Morris 37, 31). *The Purple Cloud* was published only four years after the Jubilee, but also just after the British disaster of Spion Kop (January 1900) in the Second Boer War. Britain’s defeat was “hardly the New Year’s gift that Britain wanted at the turn of the century, and it seemed to confirm some in their gloomy prognostication of imperial decline and disintegration” (Judd 154). While patriotic propaganda presented it as a crusade, to some people the war “seemed to represent all that was reprehensible in British imperialism” since they believed that Britain’s real purpose was to lay “its bloodstained hands upon the gold mines of the Rand” (155).

Shiel’s novel seems to give voice to precisely this growing uneasiness and anxiety regarding the imperialist enterprise. In *The Purple Cloud*, instead of the cheering crowds of the Jubilee displaying “allegiance and brotherhood,” we are presented with the deeply disturbing crowd that Adam, back from the Pole, finds in Paddington Station, London:

[I] walked [...] among trains within which the dead still stood upright, propped by one another, and over rails where bodies were as ordinary and cheap as waves on the sea [...]. I saw that the trains [in order to escape the purple cloud], must have moved through a slough of bodies. (106)

Also, far from celebrating the British Empire, Adam resolves to destroy London, its capital and heart (154). The purple cloud and its mortal effects force him to realize that, under its inviting and respectable appearance, London (and, by extension, England) is, in fact, a “deadly” place. Adam’s description of Clodagh’s corpse is symbolic of his new awareness concerning his country:

the curves of the woman’s bust and hips still well-preserved in a dress of red, much faded now; but her face [...] a noseless skeleton which grinned from ear to ear, the jaw dropped—horrid in contrast with the grace of the body, and frame of hair. (145)

It is noteworthy that when, towards the end of the novel, he makes a short list of the world’s evils, Adam includes “Clodaghs,” “Borgias,” and

“Rockefellers” (229). The connections among Rockefeller[s], capitalism and the primacy of profit are evident, and, indeed, in *The Purple Cloud* there are many attacks on the capitalist and materialist mentality of Victorianism. Shiel (like H. G. Wells) was a passionate socialist and, although there is no evidence for it, it is “quite possible” that he belonged to “socialist organizations” of his time (Bleiler 32). In Shiel’s novel, Clodagh (or Victoria’s England?) is a greedy murderess whose favourite character in history is Lucrezia Borgia (19), the famous (alleged) poisoner. But if we consider the imperialist context of *The Purple Cloud*, another Borgia might have been in Shiel’s mind as a figure of evil: Lucrezia’s father, Pope Alexander VI. With a Papal Bull dated 1493, Alexander VI apportioned the “New” World between Imperial Spain and Portugal and officially sanctioned and defined the geographical but, most importantly, the psychological, political, and imperialist parameters of the European role in what Tzvetan Todorov has called “the modern era” which he believes began in the year 1492 (5). Of course, 1492 was also a crucial year for the development of capitalist modernity since it “put paid to the real (historical) limits on amassing capital” (Phillips 195). Edward Kamau Brathwaite has argued that, when “Europe entered the Caribbean with a baseness, with a materialist intention and a materialist specialization which was not the original concept of Europe,” an “alteration of consciousness” took place and informed the European effort to “discover, penetrate, to seek new worlds” (3).

Curiously enough, these observations echo a peculiar theory that, in *The Purple Cloud*, is attributed to Scotland, a friend of Adam.⁴ According to Scotland, the universe is being contended for by two powers, the Black and the White and, while the White “had got the best of it up to the Middle Ages in Europe, [...] since then [it] had been slowly, stubbornly, giving way before the Black” (18). Admittedly, Shiel resorts to the cliché of Black as Evil and White as Good and identifies history with *European* history, but what is interesting here is the fact that the modern era is defined as a moment where Evil has the upper hand over Good. Besides, what Brathwaite calls “alteration of consciousness”—and Scotland the prevalence of Black power—had not been overturned when Adam sets off on his journey to the Pole. The effect of this capitalist enterprise

(the potential annihilation of the human race) is catastrophic, like the consequences of the arrival of Columbus in the Caribbean (destruction of the Amer-Indians, slavery, and plantocracy).

After burning London, Adam moves to Imbros, a Turkish island, where he decides to build his palace/temple. Again, reflecting late nineteenth-century attitudes toward the East (during the Jubilee procession, the fezzes of the Cypriot Zaptiehs “struck so jarring a chord that some of the crowd hissed them, *supposing them to be Turks*” (Morris 32, emphasis added), Adam’s plans for his decadent, sensual, violent, and tyrannical life in Imbros reinforce and reiterate Orientalist stereotypes:

I will ravage and riot in my kingdoms [...] and be a withering blight where I pass like Sennacherib, and wallow in soft delights like Sardanapalus; [...] there are wines, opiums, hashish, [...] oils and spices, fruit and oysters, and soft Cyclades, luxurious Orients. (136)

Adam’s remarks are a good example both of “Europe’s collective day-dream of the Orient” (Kiernan 55) and of “the very power of Orientalism,” which, according to Said, “produced not only a fair amount of exact positive knowledge about the Orient but also a kind of second-order knowledge—lurking in such places as the “Oriental” tale, the mythology of the mysterious East” (52). In fact, while Sennacherib was a real King of Assyria (704-681 BC), Sardanapalus is a legendary figure who, according to Greek fable, was notorious for his effeminacy, corruption, and sensual lifestyle.

Predictably, the dominant discursive practices concerning the East do find their way into *The Purple Cloud* but, if we consider the historical/political moment in which the novel was written and the received ideas to which the text itself testifies, what is almost paradoxical is that Adam should show respect and even admiration both for the Turks (“these proud Turks died stolidly, many of them” (197)) and for Constantinople (“long ago I lived here—the fairest of the cities and the greatest” (196)). Adam’s aim is to burn Constantinople as he has done with London, Paris, Peking and other capitals of Empires, but—very unusually for him—for six weeks he plays for time: “the place seems to plead with me,

it is so fair” (198). He finally sets fire to it, but only because he senses that the city is not dead and he feels threatened. Before doing that, though, he indulges in a moment of fond recollection:

in the houses of Phanar, in noisy old Galata, in the Jew quarter of Pri-pacha, the black shoe and head-dress of the Greek is still distinguishable from the Hebrew blue: for it was a ritual of colours here in boot and hat—yellow for Mussulman, red boot, black calpac for Armenian, for the Effendi a white turban, for the Greek a black, while the Tartar skull shines from under a calpac, the Nizain-djid’s from a melon-shaped head-piece, the Imam’s and Dervish’s from a conical felt, and here and there a “Frank” in European rags. (198)

This passage is followed by a description of various areas of the city where different ethnic groups used to live. Overall, the pages dedicated to Constantinople are imbued with a nostalgic, poetic, and celebratory flavour that is rather atypical for Adam and rather striking if compared with his attitude towards London, which is presented as the epitome of moral corruption:

There were places in that city—secrets, vastness, horrors! [...] in a house near Regent’s park, shut in from the street by shrubbery and a wall, I saw a thing [...] and what shapes a great city hid I only now know. (153)

Adam’s ambiguous enthusiasm for the Orient and his decision to move to Turkey are anticipated by the fact that, while still in London, he decides to change his Western clothes for Eastern ones:

the bizarrerie of the European clothes which I wore had become an offence and mockery in my eyes, so at the first moment I set out whither I knew that I should discover such clothes as a man might wear: to the Turkish Embassy. (135)

I cannot quite state why the tendency toward Orientalism—Oriental dress—all the manner of an Oriental monarch—has taken full possession of me, but so it is: for surely I am hardly

any longer a Western, “modern” mind, but a primitive Eastern one. [...] I seem to have gone right back to the beginning, to resemblance with man in his first simple, gaudy conditions. (140-41)

What follows is a long description of the new Adam wearing *izar*, *quamis*, *sudeyree*, *khafian*, *babooshes*, and gold and silver jewellery that, actually, seems to contradict the idea of “man in his first simple, gaudy conditions.” I will return to this point later, but it is noteworthy that, generally, colonial discourse identifies the Orient with degeneracy and decadence and not with primitivism. Adam’s transformation of himself into an Oriental(ist) “satrap” (162) embodies many negative characteristics that Western discourse has attributed to Eastern people (despotism, laziness, violence, irrationality). Nevertheless, in the above quotation, the word “modern” appears in inverted commas, as if to challenge the alleged positivity of the term. Moreover, because of the terrible actions that the “Western ‘modern’ mind” has proved itself capable and *guilty* of, according to the novel’s plot, it becomes very difficult to establish that, in the implied opposition between Occident and Orient, the good is on the European “modern” (capitalist and imperialist) side. Adam’s transvestitism therefore seems to throw into question the binary categories of “Eastern” and “Western” and to turn him into a living paradox, a disrupting embodiment of ambiguity.

Adam’s transvestitism in *The Purple Cloud* could be read as a displacement and enhancement of Shiel’s ambiguity and uncertainty about his own identity and, possibly, as a subtle way to challenge, again quoting Balutansky and Sourieau, the very concept of “‘being’ as a stable category,” the “God-given right to dominate the inferior ‘other’” and the alleged “inferiority” of the “other” (3). In *The Purple Cloud*, Adam is not exempt from the paranoid fear/desire for the “other” characteristic of colonial mentality and, when he finally encounters his (female) “other,” the text becomes fissured by even more complications and contradictions. As Adam later reconstructs the history, this last female remaining on earth was born in a cellar where her mother had been locked in as a punishment by her husband, the sultan, before the eruption of the

purple cloud. Protected by a cellar door hermetic enough to block the poison, yet porous enough to admit some oxygen, and sustained by the stores in the cellar, this young woman outlives her mother and is discovered when Adam's arsonist attack on Constantinople destroys her hiding place. After almost twenty years of isolation, she finally manages to see the sun and to explore the world. In a way, this story of living burial echoes (and upsets) a "favourite figure in colonial inscriptions [...] that of the burning widow or sati" (Loomba 153), a practice which, emphasizing both female helplessness and Oriental barbarism, was exploited by colonial propaganda to legitimize British government in India.

But if the fortuitous encounter between Adam and the Sultan's daughter somehow reconfirms the presence of Orientalist discourse in *The Purple Cloud*, it also contributes to undermine it from within by stressing once again Adam's ambiguous identity (Easterner/Western). According to Loomba, "Eastern royal or upper class/caste women being watched by, consorting with, and being saved by, European men is a feature of colonial narratives" (153) but what is unusual in *The Purple Cloud* is that the "European saviour" and the "Eastern barbarous killer" are actually contradictory aspects of the same person. Moreover, to complicate the matter further, a discursive practice other than Orientalism seems to inform Adam's description of his newfound companion:

her hair, fairer than auburn, and frizzy, forming a real robe to her nudity, robing her below her hips, [...] her eyes, a violet blue, wide in the silliest look of bewilderment. [...] Her age appeared seventeen or eighteen; I could conjecture that she was of Circassian blood, or, at least, origin; her skin whitey-brown, or old ivory white. (206)

The woman is whitey-brown⁵ and Circassian—although, significantly, one cannot be sure about her "blood" or origin. She has no knowledge of the world and, being the first one to be born after the catastrophic passage of the purple cloud, she is totally innocent, obviously naked, and an absolute "primitive." Being Circassian, she is Asiatic, and, if we refer to iconography, since the early modern period Asia has been represented as a sumptuously dressed woman, thus reinforcing the image of the

“Orient” as *decadent* rather than *primitive*. America, instead, has been depicted as a naked woman and the New World natives have been encoded in a discourse of *primitivism*, as either civil, kind, and peaceful (Arawaks) or warlike, truculent, and man-eating (Caribs).⁶ In a drawing by Jan van der Straet (*ca.* 1575), the “discovery” of America is the encounter between a half-naked woman who has just been awakened (discovered?) by a fully armoured Vespucci—while, in the background, a cannibal feast is in progress.

The Purple Cloud offers us a much more confused and confusing picture where the blurring of racial and ethnic boundaries is remarkable: a white Circassian, naked, harmless “primitive” young girl is spied upon by a European man lavishly dressed as an Easterner who, as we have seen, claims to be some sort of “primitive” himself (141). It is somehow “reassuring” that Adam’s initial plans for her totally conform to a colonial/imperialist mentality (“this creature a slave, upon whom, [...] I might perform my will” (207)), but soon his behaviour takes an unexpected (and very interesting) turn that also enhances the parallel with van der Straet’s drawing:

The little canghiar with its silver handle encrusted with coral,
its curved blade sharp as a razor, was as usual at my girdle:
and the obscenest of the fiends was whispering at my ear with
persistence: “Kill, kill—and eat”. [...] “Kill, kill—and wallow.”
(207)

While the historical, factual existence of cannibalism as a common practice among the natives of pre-Columbian America, the Pacific, and Africa is still debated, its existence within colonial discourse is as undeniable as its function to provide a moral justification for territorial expansion. In *The Purple Cloud*, however, the (potential) cannibal is actually a European wearing fine Oriental clothes and his (potential) victim/food is a white Circassian naked and gentle “primitive.”

In *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, Peter Hulme shows how Edgar Rice Burroughs seems to attribute the “hereditary instinct” (79) that prevents Tarzan from eating the body of Kulonga, whom he has just killed, to the fact that Tarzan was (although unaware of it) a member of

the white race (1-2). Adam, instead, is forced to renounce his cannibalism by a completely external force, in what is almost a divine intervention:

a flash of blinding light, attracted by the blade in my hand, struck jarring through my frame, and in the same moment the most passionate crash of thunder that ever racked a poor human heart felled me flat. (208)

If Adam's killing instrument ("canghiar") reminds us that the "cannibal" we are presented with is a "dubious" European, it is interesting that the first impediment that he encounters when he is about to jump (and feast) on his victim is his own Oriental attribute:

I stole, toward her through the belt of bush, the knife behind my back [...] till there came a restraint, a check—I felt myself held back—had to stop—one of the sheaves of my beard having caught in a limb of prickly pear. (208)⁷

Adam's propensity to cannibalism, therefore, seems to confirm that, instead of being a practice peculiar to "uncivilized primitives" (or "Oriental savages"),⁸ "the other's cannibalism" should rather be read as a projection of alarmist European fantasies, a cover for colonial aggression bearing an interesting connection with capitalism and imperialism; in Crystal Bartolovich's words, "the cannibal appetite is the self-consolidating other of capitalist appetite as well as European civility" (214).

Adam's princess also seems to encode another aspect of the (male) colonialist imagination since, at times, she seems to display the "perfect" feminine behaviour: her devotion to Adam is constantly reaffirmed and she never stops following (and serving) him. In a capitalist and imperial age characterized by selfish greed and fierce competition, the ongoing female stereotype was Patmore's "the angel in the house," a creature whose spiritual and moral duty was to guide and uplift her more worldly and intellectual mate. Significantly, Adam admits,

Surely her presence [...] has worked some profound modifications in my mood: for gone now are those storm-tossed hours

when [...] I flaunted my monarchy in the face of the heavens
[...] or was off to reduce some city to ashes. (233-4)

“The ‘Circassian’ angel” in *The Purple Cloud*, however, is endowed with more independence of thought and initiative than one might initially expect. First of all, she prevents Adam from naming her: she refuses to be called Clodagh, a name Adam, determined not to propagate the human race, chooses for her to remind himself of her potential danger, and she tricks him into calling her Leda.⁹ Moreover, although Adam teaches her “language” and to read, to write, to dress herself (in the Oriental fashion), to fish, to cook, to draw, etc., she is not as childlike and malleable as the “civilizing” mission of imperial ideology would have wanted her to be. In spite of exhibiting a peculiarly childlike speech impediment that turns all her *r*'s into *l*'s, she uses her ability to speak mainly to disagree with Adam, and she uses her ability to read to form an autonomous opinion of the former human race. She becomes convinced that private property (“the question of land”) and social injustice were the cause of the criminal and vicious behaviour of the former inhabitants of the planet (243) and, when Adam explains to her that “the very imagination of man’s heart is evil,” she reacts very strongly (perhaps ventriloquizing Shiel’s socialist and anti-imperialist ideas):

Oh, but none of that is ttrue [...] not ttrue of the Polynesians,
who, enjoying their land in common, lived in sinless gladness
at this garden of God, till white slaves, debased by centuries of
slaverly, went to pleach to their betters, and to steal flom them.
(269-70)

Interestingly, Leda’s knowledge of the world outside her hiding place and her education depend on the fact that she finds various English books in a villa which might have belonged to an Englishman. In a sense, then, “England’s social mission” seems to re-surface here, shedding a more positive light on what Spivak calls the “cultural representation of England to the English” (243): after all, Leda becomes a “civilized” person thanks to the positive influence of English culture and of an English Bible. Yet, although it might be argued that she seems to have

no choice, it is remarkable that Leda's religious beliefs are not forced upon her by Adam (who is understandably sceptical about the existence of God) and they become the tools she uses to antagonize him, to undermine his security, and, eventually, to 'convert' him, enacting yet another reversal of roles.

Nevertheless, the plot of the novel allows us, indeed invites us, to read (at least provisionally) the relationship between Adam and Leda as a "colonial relationship": after all, on more than one occasion, Adam praises her capacity to imitate his behaviour and to copy what she sees in books' illustrations and paintings:

she had been staining her lids with kohol, like the *hanums*: so that, having found some, she must have guessed its use from the pictures: wonderfully clever! imitative as a mirror. (218)

According to Homi Bhabha, mimicry is "one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge" and its effect "on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing" (85-86). When Leda begins mimicking *European* dress and manners after they are forced to move westward and decide to reside in the Castle of Chillon, Adam appears to be deeply upset by her behaviour: "what made things horrider for me was her adoption of European clothes since coming to this place" (263). What makes "the *menace* of mimicry" (Bhabha 88) more threatening is the fact that Leda's presence and influence seem, ironically, to push Adam to revert more and more to Western clothes:

I have wondered whether a certain *Western-ness*—a growing modernity of tone—may be the result [...] of her presence with me? (236)

Myself, somehow, had now resumed European dress, and [...] my manner and thought might once more now have been called "modern." (264)

While what is meant by "modernity of tone" remains vague and unclear, categories like *Western-ness* or "modern" are marked either by italics, drawing attention to the fact that the word (and perhaps, implicitly, the concept) does not really exist, or appear (again) in inverted commas, as

if to signal a withdrawal of trust in the word (and ultimately in what it is supposed to stand for).

The relationship between a Westernized Leda and a re-Westernized Adam, therefore, seems to reiterate (and entangle) the ambivalent position of the colonized mimic (wo)man in relation to the colonizer: “*almost the same but not quite*” (Bhabha 89). Leda, in fact, always “had the assurance to modify the dress [Adam] put upon her” (226), “her Western dressing is [...] her own goût” (263-64) and, perhaps most importantly, her reversal in speech of *r*'s and *l*'s stubbornly resists Anglicization. In Shiel's novel, far from signifying a condition of inferiority, subservience, and powerlessness, Leda's “ambivalence” (“*almost the same but not quite*”)—complicated but not annihilated by Adam's transvestitism—reiterates and amplifies the challenge to the concept of “‘being’ as a stable category,” to the “God-given right to dominate the inferior ‘other’” and, implicitly, to the alleged inferiority of the other (Balutansky and Sourieau 3).

The final part of the book depicts an agonizing Adam who finally accepts his destiny and surrenders to Leda's will and love (which, according to the novel's logic, stands for God's will and love as well). The book's final words unashamedly give away the religious and didactic agenda of the novel:

For I, Adam Jeffson, parent of a race, hereby lay down [...]:
That the one motto and watchword proper to the riot and odyssey of Life in general, and in especial to the race of men, ever was, and remains, even this: “Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him.” (288)

What is interesting is the use of the word “race,” which is also employed a couple of paragraphs earlier in the same page:

I look for a race that shall resemble his mother: nimble-witted, light-minded, pious—like her; all-human, ambidextrous, ambicephalus, two-eyed—like her; and if, like her, they talk the English language with all the *r*'s turned into *l*'s, that will be nice too. (288)

At the time when *The Purple Cloud* was written, skin colour was the main determinant in distinguishing between groups of people and categorizing their behaviour, and Social Darwinism, championed by supporters of *laissez faire* capitalism like William Graham Sumner, was exploited to bolster the establishment of the supremacy of (white) imperial culture.¹⁰ We know that Adam and his Circassian princess are both white, but one is entitled to wonder if Shiel (whose mother was a free slave mulatto and whose father was of Irish descent) might have decided to conclude a novel which distils colonial and imperial anxiety and gives voice to the “dark subconscious to the thinking mind of Imperialism” (Roberts 66), mocking the discourse of race by identifying “different” (deliberately unlikely) “markers.” Shiel’s words acquire greater resonance if we consider that even today, races are thought of as “either ‘black’ or ‘white,’ but never ‘big-eared’ and ‘small-eared’” (Miles 71) nor, borrowing Adam’s words, as “nimble-witted, light-minded, pious [...] all-human, ambidextrous, ambicephalus, two-eyed.”

In *Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction*, Scott McCracken has pointed out that “at the root of all science fiction lies the fantasy of alien encounter” (102). Colonial and imperial discourse is also preoccupied with representing “the meeting of self with other” (102) and in its articulation, through strategic discursive practices such as Orientalism, primitivism, cannibalism, savagery, racism, and essentialism, it invariably ends up praising the “self” and diminishing or demonizing the “other.” Although *The Purple Cloud* does not constitute a complete rejection of these discursive practices that dominated Victorian times (occasionally it actually supports and reproduces them), it successfully exploits and explodes them to the extent that it can be read as a very dense, mobile, and complex work that exposes the brutality of the capitalistic profit-motive as a basis for human relationship, allows doubt and conflict about the official ideology of the Empire to surface, paradoxical disruption to emerge, and a counter-hegemonic alternative to find a space. It is precisely the “science-fictionality” of *The Purple Cloud*, the fact that it “seeks to *represent* the world instead of *reproducing* it” (Delany 123, emphasis added), that enables the “eccentric” Shiel to explore ambivalent feelings towards the “other[s]” and to articulate a set of

preoccupations about the imperial enterprise that, if acknowledged, contribute to dismantling the notion of a monolithic, unchallengeable, and unchallenged imperial/colonial discourse.

Notes

- 1 Restrictions of space prevent me from addressing the debate on the definition of “science fiction” and its appropriateness for works like *The Purple Cloud* (see, among others, Brian Stableford’s *Scientific Romances in Britain 1890-1950*, Darko Suvin’s *Victorian Science Fiction in the UK: The Discourses of Knowledge and Power*, Robert Scholes’ *Structural Fabulation: An Essay on Fiction of the Future*). Since the main object of my investigation is the relationship between Shiel’s *The Purple Cloud* and colonial/imperial discourse, for the purpose of this paper, I decided to leave this debate aside and opted to refer to Shiel’s *The Purple Cloud* as “science fiction.”
- 2 The University of Nebraska Press has just issued this new edition of *The Purple Cloud* with an introduction by John Clute, but for the purpose of this work I will be referring to Gollancz’s edition published in London in 1978, which reproduces Shiel’s 1901 version of the novel. Clute’s edition, instead, is based on a new and revised version of *The Purple Cloud* that Shiel published in 1929, which was more refined in terms of language but which eliminated what Clute defines as “some very savage elements—cannibalism” (vii) that are actually crucial to my argument.
- 3 According to W. B. Stevenson’s *Narrative of Twenty Years’ Residence in South America* (1825). See Mary Louise Pratt (152) or Ania Loomba (119-20) for the reproduction of a table from Stevenson’s book detailing “the mixture of the different castes, under their common or distinguishing names.”
- 4 Interestingly, the very name of Adam’s friend (Scotland) and the importance of his theory as far as the novel is concerned seem to testify to the centrality of the marginalized.
- 5 It is interesting to note that chromatism does not apply to the relationship between the Irish and the English colonizers.
- 6 For a full discussion of this distinction see Peter Hulme’s *Colonial Encounters* 44-87.
- 7 When Adam describes his “transformation” into an Oriental, after a careful description of his new clothes, he adds: “my beard sweeping scented in two opening whisks to my ribs” (141).

- 8 After all, as Peter Hulme has pointed out in *Colonial Encounters*, Christopher Columbus does say in his journal that “the Caniba are nothing else than the people of the Grand Khan” (22).
- 9 The name Leda is actually a “strategic” one because, as Adam himself realizes far too late “I should not be surprised if this ‘Leda’ is the same as ‘Eve,’ for all languages were connected at bottom [...]. Such, at any rate, is the fatality that tracks me, even in little things: for this Western Eve, or Greek Leda, had twins [...]” (251).
- 10 See, for example, Thomas Carlyle’s “The Nigger Question” (1849).

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