

# Degeneration and the Environment in Victorian and Edwardian Fiction

By  
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## Degeneration and the Environment in Victorian and Edwardian Fiction

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## Abstract

This dissertation reveals that Victorian degeneration theory—a multivalent concept of individual and evolutionary decay best remembered as the motivation for eugenics—was based partly in fears about the influence of urban and tropical places on the British race and nation. Environmental formulations of degeneration theory asserted that cities and the tropics caused physical and mental degeneracy, while the British countryside promoted healthy racial development. This concept of environmentally-driven degeneration shaped the Victorian and Edwardians’ environmental practices. Environmental degeneration theory furthermore inspired a new kind of fiction wherein the physical environmental drives the degeneration or development of an individual or an entire community. By focusing on a selection of children’s and science fiction novels featuring this plot alongside childrearing manuals, medical texts, and other primary documents, this dissertation shows how such fiction disseminated environmental degeneration theory and helps us understand the racial and evolutionary anxieties that motivated British environmental praxis at home and in the empire.

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## Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction .....	1
Chapter Two: Natural Law, Punitive Evolution, and the City in <i>The Water-Babies: A Fairy-Tale for a Land Baby</i> .....	30
Chapter Three: <i>The Princess and the Goblin</i> , <i>The Time Machine</i> , and the Dehumanizing Underground .....	64
Chapter Four: Tropical Degeneration and <i>The Island of Doctor Moreau</i> .....	86
Chapter Five: The Tropicalized Child and Racial Regeneration in <i>The Secret Garden</i> .....	102

## Chapter One

### Introduction

This dissertation focuses on a collection of British science fiction and children's novels published in volume form between 1863 and 1911 wherein the physical environment determines a character or group's physical and mental degeneration or, conversely, their development. Their plots of environmentally-driven change, I argue, were innovative, and build upon contemporary ideas regarding the influence of the environment on the development and deterioration of human individuals, races, and the species. More precisely, these novels negotiate fears prevalent in the United Kingdom from the mid-Victorian period until around World War I that unhealthy environments—namely the tropical colonies and industrialized, denatured places at home—were causing the British to degenerate, a process of bodily and mental deterioration that worsened with each generation. In what follows, I show that Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby* (1863), George MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911) constitute a significant subgenre of what scholars call Victorian and Edwardian “fictions of degeneration” that is concerned with degeneracy caused, at least in part, by places inhospitable and unnatural to British constitutions.<sup>1</sup>

### Degenerative Environments

The widespread interest in degeneration as a medical condition and devolutionary process threatening racial health and national security peaked in Britain around the *fin de siècle*, but it emerged during the Darwinian revolution of the 1860s and persisted well into the new century

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Pick and William Greenslade both use the term “fiction of degeneration” to describe short- and long-form fiction that engages the science of degeneration.

before disappearing in the wake of the World Wars. Although writers including Bénédict Augustine Morel, E. Ray Lankester, Max Nordau, and Eugene Talbot attempted throughout the era to define degeneration in manifesto-style treatises, its meaning was never fixed (Arata 14-15; Pick 7). Rather, degeneration was a decidedly protean concept which functioned as “a form of ‘common sense’” underpinning British thought (Arata 16).<sup>2</sup> The subject permeated scientific, political, and public discourse, appearing variously in writing on any number of topics, including childrearing, the colonies, criminology, and city parks.<sup>3</sup> Despite its multivalence, degeneration was invariably linked to intermingling concerns about race and the nation. Stephen Arata makes this point clearly: “Anxieties about the decay of the individual body were inseparable from anxieties about the decay of the collective ‘body’ figured in national and racial terms” (6).

Degeneration’s conceptual flexibility allowed it to become, in Daniel Pick’s apt words, “the condition of conditions, the ultimate signifier of pathology” (8). Put another way, it was an “explanatory myth ... with widespread applications” (Greenslade 15). Commentators throughout the period blamed it for a host of social and medical problems, including alcoholism; neurasthenia; and proletariat unrest, and used it to other large groups of people on biological grounds (Arata 16-17; Karschay 3; Pick 15). “Degenerates” included anyone who middle- and upper-class populations saw as a threat to British identity and national interest: people with disabilities or mental illness, criminals, the poor, homosexuals, tropicalized citizens, nonwhite races, and anyone else who could be labeled defective and non-normative (Karschay 3). As

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Arata follows Antonio Gramsci’s theorization of common sense as ideology that he elaborates in “Notes for an Introduction and an Approach to the Study of Philosophy of the History of Culture” (16).

<sup>3</sup> The essays collected in J. Edward Chamberlin and Sander L. Gilman’s *Degeneration: The Dark Side of Progress* (1985) demonstrate how differently the term was used across different areas of Victorian society.

Stephen Karschay notes, the positivist project was devoted to classifying different types of biological deviance, but the category of degenerate grew so large that the condition appeared “itself the norm,” which only fed fears of social and evolutionary decline (3).

The British were especially troubled by two general types of degeneration: that which afflicted the residents of London and other cities (especially, but not only the poor), and that which threatened citizens living in the colonial tropics. Even so, the scholarship focuses predominantly on one or the other, not both.<sup>4</sup> For example, Daniel Pick’s seminal study, *Faces of Degeneration*, looks exclusively at urban degeneration, as do William Greenslade and Stephen Karschay’s studies of degeneration and British fiction. Discussions of tropical degeneration appear primarily in studies of tropical medicine, racial science and anthropology, geography, and Victorian literature and empire.<sup>5</sup> This bifurcation allows for thorough, detailed studies, but it also elides the connection between these two strains of degenerationism. I expand on this work here, considering both types to parse their shared basis in pastoral, xenophobic concern regarding the impact of long-term exposure to unfamiliar and seemingly hostile places on British minds and bodies. I contend that degeneration was partly an ecological concept grounded in (1) the belief that the British belonged, biologically *and* culturally, to the island’s green and pleasant countryside and (2) cultural anxiety regarding changing conditions at home and the alien environments of the empire.

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Arata’s *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* is one exception. Arata examines representations of national, biological, and aesthetic decline during the fin de siècle and thus focuses on both domestic and imperial issues.

<sup>5</sup> Such work includes David Livingstone’s “Tropical Climate and Moral Hygiene: The Anatomy of a Victorian Debate” (1999), Nancy Stepan’s oeuvre, and Dane Kennedy’s *The Magic Mountains: Hill Stations and the British Raj* (1996).



Theories of degeneration fell into two further, albeit muddled, categories: those which located the cause first and foremost in heredity, or bad breeding, and those which blamed deleterious environments and their accompanying lifestyles for altering individual constitutions and thus family lineages (some theorists, such as Bénédict Augustine Morel and Eugene Talbot, blamed both heredity and the environment, which I touch on below). Save for the work of Peter Thorsheim and a few other historians, the scholarship focuses predominantly on degeneration as a science and crisis about heredity without critically examining its relationship to ideas about nature, place, and the environment—and understandably so. Hereditary theories of degeneration inspired eugenics and social hygiene projects in Britain, Germany, the United States and elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> But that is only part of the story, since fears of racial and thus national degeneration prompted by the savage tropics and the poisonous, denatured landscapes of industrial modernity—what I will call *degenerative environments*—shaped ecological thought throughout and beyond the Victorian period. Degeneration consequently motivated a range of efforts to transform, manage, and escape unhealthy environments in the colonies and Great Britain, including the development of hill stations in India and the parks, garden cities, and back-to-nature movements in England.<sup>7</sup> As I detail later in this introduction, this dissertation shows that these ideas also influenced Victorian and Edwardian literature. Rather than tracing their manifestations across innumerable texts, however, it focuses solely on key novels from the

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<sup>6</sup> For more on degeneration and eugenics, see Philippa Levine, *Eugenics: A Very Short Introduction* (2017) and Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Eugenics* (2010).

<sup>7</sup> On hill stations, see Dane Kennedy, *The Magic Mountains: Hill Stations and the British Raj* (1996). On the connection between degeneration and late Victorian environmentalism, consult Peter Thorsheim, *Inventing Pollution: Coal, Smoke, and Culture in Britain since 1800* (2006).

period that contain plots which hinge upon environmentally-driven degeneration and development.

The concept of degeneration originated in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century racial theory, which was divided between the schools of monogenesis and polygenesis. According to monogenesis, all humans are the descendants of common ancestors who, as they migrated across the world, slowly “degenerated” and formed distinct races (Hutchings 42; Neill 123; Stepan, “Biological” 97).<sup>8</sup> According to Kevin Hutchings, proponents of the theory such as the French naturalist Comte de Buffon and Scottish philosopher Adam Ferguson thought racial characteristics were primarily shaped by “environmental factors” including climate and diet (42). Since monogenesis posited that races were determined by their environments, the theory left open the possibility that changes in that environment or migration to another would prompt adaptation and racial modification. Buffon argues as much in his *Natural History*, theorizing that a white race could eventually become black if they moved out of the temperate north—their “proper place,” as Nancy Stepan calls it—to an equatorial region: “Many ages might perhaps elapse before a white race would become altogether black; but there is a probability that in time a white people, transported from the north to the equator, would experience that change” (306).

Polygenists, who believed each race had its own unique origins and were thus distinct species, adapted the concept to suit their needs (Stocking 53-54). They argued that races degenerated and died off when relocated outside of their native climate, but could not become another race already in existence (Stepan, “Biological” 97-98; Stocking 53-54). In other words, polygenists believed a white race that moved to the tropics would not become black (as Buffon

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<sup>8</sup> For more on monogenetic explanations of racial difference, see Kevin Hutchings (2009), Nancy Stepan (1982), and Robert Young (1995).

supposed), but something entirely new. Thus, although they disagreed on the consequences of migration, monogenists and polygenists both agreed that every race had, to quote the Victorian anthropologist James Hunt, “certain prescribed geographical salubrious limits from which it cannot with impunity be displaced” (53).

The notion that races are fit only for the conditions of their original homes came to preoccupy Victorian and early twentieth-century racial science, which Stepan describes as “a science of boundaries between groups and the degeneration that threatened when those boundaries were transgressed” through miscegenation *or* exposure to foreign places (“Biological” 98). This idea underpinned theories of tropical and urban degeneration in Europe and North America, both of which emphasized the danger of the British Anglo-Saxons and other white races living in such places. Especially in the later decades of the nineteenth century, the dominant opinion was that races could only thrive in their native regions (or similar places) and that exposure to another would cause at least some degeneration and even “racial extinction” (Stepan, “Biological” 99).<sup>9</sup> By this reasoning, the British belonged in the temperate north and more specifically Great Britain, where “nature was moist, genial, Anglican” (Winter 33). In hot, undisciplined places, they risked degeneration. The same deterministic thinking fed environmental theories of degeneration at home, whose prophets likewise argued that the conditions of modern urban-industrial life were unnatural to the British and would wear on the race. In this way, cities and the tropics were conceptually yoked together as degenerative environments in stark opposition to the countryside of Scotland, Wales, and especially England,

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<sup>9</sup> See also Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science*; George Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (especially pages 53-55); and David Livingstone, “Tropical Climate and Moral Hygiene: the Anatomy of a Victorian Debate.”

which they believed gave them their distinct racial and national character. Such environmental theories of race and culture date back to antiquity, but the belief that the British belonged to rural Britain took on new and increasing significance during the Victorian period for two primary reasons, which I will explain briefly.

First, evolutionary theory gradually upended traditional beliefs, sparking concerns about human mutability and impermanence, especially after Charles Darwin's *On the Origins of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* appeared in November 1859.<sup>10</sup> The two most popular schools of evolutionary science in the nineteenth century, Darwinism and (Neo-) Lamarckism, both posited that evolution was “controlled by the demands of the external environment” (Bowler, *Eclipse* 9). That is, they asserted that species evolve to fit their habitat, which underscored the importance of the relationship between people and place. If people were evolved to fit their environmental niches, changes in the environment could have significant evolutionary consequences. Indeed, for many ethnologists, anthropologists, and others concerned about geography and human difference, evolution affirmed that races are essentially bound to the conditions of their respective homes.

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<sup>10</sup> Evolution had already entered scientific and popular discourse by the time Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*. Although most scientists upheld Christian teachings about human origins, permanence, and exceptionalism, from the late eighteenth century theories on the transmutation of species proposed by figures such as Erasmus Darwin (*Zoonomia* 1794-96), Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (*Philosophie Zoologique* 1809), and Robert Chambers (*Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* 1844) drew notice. Although they were dismissed largely as speculative and circumstantial, pre-Darwinian evolutionary theory sparked debates that “helped shape the climate of opinion within which Charles Darwin formulated his own theory” and it was received (Bowler, *Evolution* 85). In fact, scholars have shown that *Vestiges* incited “a debate which rocked the foundations of Victorian opinion and paved the way for the reception of Darwin’s theory” (135). For more on pre-Darwinian evolutionary science and the cultural impact of Darwinian theory, see Peter Bowler, *Evolution: the History of an Idea*.

More generally, evolution helped generate widespread interest in the relationships between the environment and living beings, including people. Of course, this interest eventually led to the formal emergence of ecology (Ernst Haeckel coined the term in 1866), but it also extended to politics and quotidian matters.<sup>11</sup> William M. Taylor explains that because evolution and other advancements in biology showed that humans and other species are profoundly affected in the short- and long-term by their physical environment, the Victorians became increasingly attentive to the “‘causal’ relationships ... between living beings and their surroundings” (98). According to Taylor, that emergent interest in ecological relations permeated thinking on a variety of subjects, including gardening, household air quality, and larger issues of urban reform (98-99). John Parham makes a similar point. Scientific advancement, he claims, inspired “a broadly materialist awareness that ‘human being,’ moulded by social and political institutions, ultimately resides in the nature and quality of humanity’s relationship with other species and its surrounding physical environment” (5).

At the same time these epistemological changes were unfolding, industrialization and urbanization at home and colonial expansion abroad brought increasing numbers of British citizens into prolonged contact with places strikingly dissimilar to the ancestral countryside and which they experienced as insalubrious and even malevolent. Throughout the Romantic and early Victorian years, physicians, social reformers, and other commenters had raised concerns about the effects of tropical climates and urban-industrial places on health and character; they saw both as centers of disease and moral decay.<sup>12</sup> Evolution amplified their concerns such that

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<sup>11</sup> On the history of ecological science, see Donald Worster, *Nature’s Economy* (1977) and John Kricher, *The Balance of Nature: Ecology’s Enduring Myth* (2009), among others.

<sup>12</sup> On this subject, see Alan Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease* (2003) and Michelle Allen, *Cleansing the City* (2007).

the British came to see those places as threats not just to individuals, but also to the phylogenic trajectory of the British people. Consequently, they embraced the nature-filled countryside as their true home and a salve for the damage caused by degenerative environments within and beyond the metropole.

### **Degeneration at Home**

The unprecedented urbanization, pollution, and environmental degradation brought about by nineteenth-century industrialization created denatured, blighted, and altogether novel landscapes inside and out of Britain's metropolitan centers.<sup>13</sup> Although industrialization affected rural areas too, cities garnered far more scrutiny because of their reputation as cesspools of material and moral filth and the monstrous rapidity with which they grew. In 1800, London had a population of about one million people. When Victoria took the throne, the population had doubled, and when she died, the city had swollen to approximately six and a half million (Thorsheim 5; Reidhead 1017). Other cities, including Glasgow and Leeds, grew proportionally even more rapidly (Williams 217; Thorsheim 5). Halfway through the century, more British citizens lived in cities and towns than in rural areas for the first time in history (Williams 217; Thorsheim 5). The depopulation of the countryside and compounding urban maladies like overcrowding, poor sanitation, and pollution generated significant anti-urban pastoral sentiment and prompted the emergence of the sanitary reform movement in the early years of Victoria's reign.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> James Winter discusses these changes to the environment in *Secure from Rash Assault: Sustaining the Victorian Environment* (1999), the most expansive work of environmental history on Victorian England.

<sup>14</sup> On the movement for sanitary reform, see Michelle Allen, *Cleansing the City*, and Anthony Wohl, *Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain* (1983). On pastoral and the Industrial Revolution, see Winter in addition to Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (1973) and Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991).

By the 1840s and 1850s, critics viewed London and other cities as “atmospheric, environmental, and, above all, ... moral sink[s]” and the urban poor as a savage and “disquieting alien presence” in desperate need of intervention (Luckin 248; Stedman Jones 14). Writers reported on the so-called “great unwashed” and their living conditions with anthropological vigor while early champions of sanitary reform such as Edwin Chadwick strove in various ways to improve both (Allen 1, 11).

The possibility that the unnatural conditions of modern life were creating a degenerate subset of the British populace emerged in the late 1850s after the publication of the French psychologist Bénédict Augustine Morel’s *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles, et morales de l’espèce humaine et des causes qui produisent ces variétés malade* in 1857 (Pick 189-190). Adapting the term from racial science, Morel described *dégénérescence* as a pervasive, transgenerational process of biological decline that would lead to extinction. Like those after him, Morel defined degeneration as any deviation from the standard human or racial type that became progressively worse with each generation (Arata 15; Rose 57). He thus included an astounding array of conditions and behaviors like cretinism and rickets as symptoms of individual degeneracy and widespread decline (Pick 50; Rose 57). For Morel, degeneracy could be inborn or acquired through exposure to damaging influences such as opium and squalid, amoral urban slums (Greenslade 17; Rose 57). Consequently, William Greenslade and Anna Neill both note, the theory incorporates a negative version of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck’s principle of acquired characteristics. Rather than passing on beneficial acquired characteristics, an individual who develops degenerative symptoms during her lifetime would pass that new deviance to her offspring, who would be even further from the ideal (Greenslade 17; Neill 123).

Across the Channel, medical practitioners and social commentators quickly began adapting Morel's theory to explain the condition of the urban poor. As social Darwinist thinking took hold during the 1860s, the idea gained increasing purchase. Predicated on extant concerns about the city environment and a mythic notion of British cultural and racial identity that was rooted in the countryside and rural ways of life, the British conversation about urban degeneration was from the beginning distinctly pastoral; indeed, it fed pastoral sentiment throughout and immediately after the Victorian period. The theory confirmed and fueled affluent Victorians' worst fears about cities and their poorest occupants, who they already perceived as savage and alien, but through the lens of degeneration came to see as biologically divergent. As Bill Luckin recounts, by the 1870s "the notion of the savage had given way to a more heavily scientific, racialized and medicalized image of a degenerate urban residuum" which threatened to die off or splinter into a distinct race more like the supposedly savage Africans than the Anglo-Saxon (250).

Degeneration compounded preexisting concerns about the physical and moral wellbeing of individuals with new anxieties about environmental determinism, pollution, and racial-national fitness. In effect, it amplified the sanitation crisis by turning it into one of racial identity and evolution that many outspoken figures, including Charles Kingsley and the physicians James Cantlie and John Milner Fothergill, averred was caused mostly by the unnatural, tainted conditions of the modern city and the lifestyles it fostered—not "faulty heredity," as the eugenicists claimed (Thorsheim 69). While many Victorians did believe the propagation of inferior bloodlines was at the root of the degeneracy crisis, others like Kingsley, Cantlie, and Fothergill rejected the notion that the problem lay primarily in the racial stock (Luckin 237-238; Rose 82; Thorsheim 69-70). They were certainly concerned about miscegenation and the



reproduction of unfit persons (such as those with disabilities), but they identified the modern city environment as its main source. Consequently, although their focus remained trained on the poor, some commentators warned that *all* urban dwellers were subject to degeneration. Kingsley, for instance, argued that the city's insalubrious conditions affect all classes to a certain degree, not just the "lowest stratum" ("Great Cities" 205).

These scientists, physicians, and reformers thought "the *city itself* possessed a malign and deadly agency" which rendered perfectly normal persons and their descendants degenerate (Luckin 235; original emphasis).<sup>15</sup> For example, in Fothergill's treatise *The Town Dweller: His Needs and Wants* (1889), he claims that towns have "a malignant and sinister effect" on their occupants and likens each to "a huge dragon preying on mankind" (4, 109). Such arguments emphasized the urban poor as the helpless and unwitting victims of the industrial city who lacked the wherewithal to escape its malevolent influence. Unlike the middle- and upper-classes who could seek respite in roomy houses and countryside retreats, commentators reasoned, the poor were imprisoned by the city, which gradually etched itself into their bodies and minds and determined everything from their health to social status. Indeed, as Gareth Stedman Jones astutely argues, degeneration effectively "switched the focus of enquiry from the moral inadequacies of the individual to the deleterious influences of the urban environment" (313). Although the Victorians originally understood alcoholism, sloth, and other characteristics associated with the poor as *causes* of poverty, they came to see them, along with corporeal stigmata such as stunted growth, as *symptoms* of degeneration, the inevitable consequences "of long exposure to the degeneratory conditions of city life" (286).

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<sup>15</sup> Thorsheim makes a similar observation (7, 69).

Those who identified the environment as the primary source of the crisis hinged their arguments on the premise that cities and city life are unnatural and contrary to British constitutions, and made fervent pastoral appeals to rural life, British racial heritage, and national interests. For instance, in *The Town Dweller*, Fothergill argues insistently that the country is the natural home of the British and consequently the only place where they can thrive. In one passage, he declares, “a rural life is a natural life; ... an urban life is an unnatural life” (15). In another, he warns that the rapidly diminishing number of “rustics” are the only British citizens to remain “Anglo-Dane[s],” implying that the sturdy, fair British will soon be a nation of small, dark town dwellers akin to the Irish (117-118).

The philanthropist Reginald Brabazon, Earl of Meath, offered a similar argument two years prior in “Decay of Bodily Strength in Towns.” In this essay, Brabazon frames urban degeneration and the depopulation of the countryside as threats to national security and the long-term integrity of the race. He laments that any “intelligent man or woman” can “walk through the slums of our great towns ... [and] assure himself or herself, beyond all question or doubt, that the physical condition of the people in these crowded districts is, to say the least, unsatisfactory, and one of which no Englishman can well be proud” (674). Like Fothergill and their contemporaries, here Brabazon depicts the modern city as an unnatural and morally and physically polluted habitat, and juxtaposes it to the countryside where Britons thrive “under the pure canopy of heaven” (675).

Brabazon and many others before and after him were especially troubled by the inferior quality of military recruits since the administration of the empire demanded men who were morally, mentally, and, above all, physically fit. According to Brabazon, the army rejected nearly half its enlistees in 1884 because of “physical incapacity” (673). His and other writers’ emphasis

on the dwindling numbers of bodies capable of protecting the Crown's interests abroad reveals a close relationship between anxieties about degeneration at home and imperial power—as concerns about urban degeneration intensified, so did concerns about protecting the empire. Thorsheim makes this point clear: “concerns about the biological health of the urban working class contributed to growing anxiety about the economic and imperial fitness of Britain in the late nineteenth century” (72). Although it began at mid-century, numerous scholars note that the fervor over military recruits peaked during and just after the Second Boer War (1899-1902). Britain's embarrassing performance during the drawn-out conflict amplified anxieties about degeneration, prompting intense debates about national fitness and efficiency and the formation of the Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration to study the problem in 1903.<sup>16</sup>

At the end of their investigation, the committee determined that the degeneracy of Britain's impoverished populations—which, they admitted, was acute—was caused by a combination of an unhealthy environment and lifestyle, not heredity. Furthermore, they found no evidence to support claims that the race was permanently deteriorating. In their lengthy report, they state:

While there are, unfortunately, very abundant signs of physical defect traceable to neglect, poverty, and ignorance, it is not possible to obtain any satisfactory or conclusive evidence of hereditary physical deterioration—that is to say, deterioration of a gradual retrogressive nature, affecting one generation more acutely than the previous. There is little, if anything, in fact, to justify the

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<sup>16</sup> For discussions of degeneration, national fitness and efficiency, and the Boer War, see Deborah Dwork (11), G.R. Searle (34-53), William Greenslade (183-190), Nikolas Rose (77) Anthony Wohl (331-332), and Adrian Woolridge (22), among others.

conclusion that neglect, poverty, and parental ignorance, serious as their results are, possess any marked hereditary effect, or that heredity plays any significant part in establishing the physical degeneracy of the poorer population. (14)

Rather, they argued that degeneration was caused by three overarching environmental factors, all of which facilitated unhealthy lifestyles and were direct consequences of industrialization and urbanization: overcrowding, air pollution, and hazardous workplace conditions (16). The solution they articulated was therefore based on the principles of sanitary reform and bears some similarities to the contemporary environmental justice movement. Among other things, they called for massive improvements to the environments where the poor live and work, measures to ensure their unfettered access to untainted food and water, and initiatives to educate them in habits of physical and moral hygiene.<sup>17</sup> Accomplish this, the report indicates, and degeneracy would disappear.

Although the committee rejected the notion that degeneration was progressive and avoided the apocalyptic, anti-urban rhetoric used by figures like Fothergill, Brabazon, or Cantlie, their report echoed and legitimized the arguments of those who insisted throughout the era that “only a radical transformation in explicitly *environmental* conditions could save the hungry and ill-housed from progressive mental and biological decline” (Luckin 239; original emphasis).<sup>18</sup> As

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<sup>17</sup> Agnes Kneitz’s essay “‘As if the River Was Not Meat and Drink to You!’: Social Novels as a Means of Framing Nineteenth-Century Environmental Justice” discusses Victorian sanitary reform’s similarities to environmental justice.

<sup>18</sup> Greenslade suggests that the committee’s preference for the term *deterioration* rather than *degeneration* “signifies their general rejection of hereditary degeneration” (189). Thorsheim likewise notes that the clean air activists and urban reformers who opposed eugenics preferred *deterioration* because it suggested that the problem was repairable (79). However, the terms were very often used interchangeably (even in the committee’s report).

Thorsheim shows, this conviction inspired much of what we now recognize as environmental activism during the Victorian and Edwardian periods.<sup>19</sup> (They did not use the terms “environmentalism” and “environmentalist” as we do now [Winter 19].) Like the environmentalist strain of degeneration discourse, Victorian environmentalism was largely based in anti-urban, Arcadian, and romantic ideals—it was pastoral (Winter 8-9, 193; Luckin 239, 242). Amidst heightened fears of cultural, biological, and environmental decline, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century activists thus worked toward two broad goals: to preserve and protect the beloved countryside, its wildlife, and ways of life, and to improve cities so that they more closely approximated the country and the urban population could live like their healthier rural peers. British national identity was deeply rooted in the countryside, and evolutionary thinking linked the race biologically to that environment—not the denatured, polluted city, and certainly not a countryside scarred and blackened by industrial progress. Consequently, reformers like Brabazon and Octavia Hill thought that preserving and reconnecting British citizens with the ancestral landscape and simultaneously revamping cities to match it was the key to ensuring the nation’s continued biological and political progress.

At the same time, writers including John Ruskin, Edward Carpenter, and William Morris composed scathing pastoral critiques of urbanization, industrialization, and environmental degradation and called for a return to rural life, presenting it in idealized, nostalgic terms that appealed to many (Luckin 242; Winter 192). Widespread anti-urban feeling prompted the formation of conservation groups and sparked fervent support for rural regeneration schemes

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<sup>19</sup> The same conviction spurred conservation and the Back to Nature Movement in the United States around the same time (for reference, see Robin Schulze, *The Degenerate Muse: American Nature, Modernist Poetry, and the Problem of Cultural Hygiene* [2013]).

such as repopulation programs and farm colonies, especially among those seeking solutions to what Cantlie called “urbomorbis” (Gould 61, 132-137; Luckin 245; Winter 17, 25, 255). Many reformers, Luckin points out, believed “the repopulation of shrunken village communities ... [would] save the nation, and the empire, from environmental and biological collapse” (245).

They also worked in various ways to clean up and “green” cities for the corporeal, psychological, and moral benefit of their occupants, especially the degenerate poor, who they insisted stood to benefit most from bringing the country into the city. The physician and professor of anatomy Daniel John Cunningham, for example, articulates this view in a statement before the Inter-Departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration: “the more nearly you can approach the rural life, the greater amount of certainty you will have that there will be an improvement in the physical conditions of the people” (103; also qtd. in Thorsheim 72). Years earlier, Octavia Hill made a similar argument at an 1877 meeting of the National Health Society. The best way to ensure the health of the poor, she declared, “is to make the places” they inhabit “healthy, [and] to let them have open space where the fresh wind may blow over them and their clothes, places where they may be less crowded and gain health” (qtd. in Gould 93).

Reformers consequently mounted campaigns to abate smoke pollution, improve sanitation and housing conditions, ensure access to clean food and water, create gardens and parkland for wholesome recreation and exercise, and more (Gould 124; Thorsheim; Winter 193). They also promoted rural tourism as a treatment for the urban constitution and a way to reinvigorate the rural economy, and those who could afford it flocked to the seaside and other rustic destinations (Winter 210). Philanthropists such as Henrietta and Samuel Barnett organized country holidays for children whose families could not afford such trips, emphasizing “not only

the health benefits of such outings, but also their ‘civilizing’ effects” (Thorsheim 64).<sup>20</sup> Above all, these efforts aimed to alleviate the degeneracy epidemic by revamping the artificial, deleterious conditions of the city environment and reconnecting the urban population with British nature and natural ways of life.

### **Degeneration Abroad**

Like the modern city, most Victorians thought that tropical locales like lowland India, the Congo Basin, and the Caribbean islands were unnatural, dangerous places for they and other Europeans to live, even as they desired to exploit and control their natural resources and native populations. As Warwick Anderson wryly remarks, they believed the tropics were “No place for a white man, and yet just the place for white dominion over man and nature” (“Disease” 63). While the problem with cities lay in part with the dearth of healthful nature found within them, the British and other colonialists during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries feared the tropics partly because there nature was too abundant. It was also the wrong kind. To colonialists, tropical nature was savage, alien, and overly fecund, just like the people who lived in and gained their characteristics from it.

Drawing upon Edward Said’s work on Orientalism, David Arnold points out that the tropics appear in Western thought as the antithesis of the civilized world of Europe and other temperate areas (143). Europeans, he argues, have historically defined tropical regions against the perceived normalcy of the temperate zone, and the terms “the tropics,” “equatorial,” and

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<sup>20</sup> The Barnetts founded the “Children’s Fresh Air Mission (Off to the Country)” in 1884. It was renamed the Children’s Country Holiday Fund in 1886 (CCHF, “Our History”), and by World War I had taken “nearly one million children” on country trips (Thorsheim 64). It still exists today.

“torrid” function within colonial discourse to mark places as “environmentally distinctive” and “culturally alien” (143). In the eighteenth century, some travelers—including the world-famous Alexander van Humboldt—celebrated that difference and the wonders of tropical nature, but imperial expansion in the next century brought a far more pessimistic view (Stepan, *Picturing* 48).

A few factors led to the so-called “darkening of the tropics” that occurred in the nineteenth century, including the high mortality and disease rates of Europeans in tropical climates, increased colonial contact, and new ideas about race and environmental determinism. It was widely believed that nature dictated the physical, moral, and cultural characteristics of the supposedly inferior, uncivilized races (Arnold 142; Livingstone 105), much in the same way that middle- and upper-class citizens at home thought the urban poor absorbed the city’s grime into their bodies and characters. The threat, of course, was that the strange, overwhelming nature of the tropics would also cause the European to become “tropicalized” (Stepan, “Biological” 99; Wear 39), a euphemistic term that meant, above all, nonwhite, savage, *other*.

The questions of whether and how Europeans could live even temporarily in the tropics without degenerating were thus central to racial science, tropical medicine, and colonial discourse throughout the era (Anderson, “Disease” 63; Livingstone; Stepan, *Idea* xiv; “Biological” 98-99; Stocking 53). Since the mission of colonialism itself mostly went unquestioned, physicians and other writers devoted themselves to the problem of acclimatization, which was also written as acclimatisation, acclimation, and acclimatation (Anderson, “Climates” 63). Although some people were confident that the British and other Europeans could acclimate to the tropics without compromising their health and racial identity, far more disagreed. Official opinion held that the threat of degeneration precluded the possibility of establishing settler



colonies in such places (those were saved for more hospitable climates). For example, Dane Kennedy explains that European planters and other permanent residents who were unaffiliated with the administration “insisted that India posed no environmental barrier to colonization” (*Magic* 34). However, colonial officials were dismayed by the amoral habits of those men, who were notorious for their heavy alcohol use and having mixed-race children with Indian mistresses, among other things. Consequently, despite their insistence that the climate was safe, administrators, physicians, and racial theorists alike took their behavior as a sign of degeneracy and held them up as living testaments to the dangers of long-term residence in the tropics (*Magic* 35).

This example highlights the way Victorian concerns about tropical degeneration and acclimatization rolled together issues of race, conduct and morality, and national identity into one. As David Livingstone suggests, the ongoing debate about the tropics across medicine, anthropology, and other areas of inquiry was essentially one about anatomy and morality that bore directly on national interests (109). Imperial power, national culture, and racial purity were all at stake simply because the tropical environment appeared to have, like the city, a “malign and deadly agency” that could alter individual constitutions and the intrepid bloodlines of the British and their white compatriots (Luckin 235).

Writers throughout the period warned of the threat the tropics posed, rehearsing nearly identical arguments over and over that speak to the tenacity of their fear. James Hunt, for example, argues that the degeneration of Europeans in India and Africa was inevitable in his 1863 essay “On Ethno-Climatology; or the Acclimatization of Man.” On the effects of the African climate on Europeans, he claims: “When . . . the European goes to Africa, he, for a short time, retains his vigour of mind; but soon he finds his energies exhausted, and becomes listless,

and nearly as indifferent to surrounding events as the natives” (57). Hunt suggests that this is just the beginning of a degenerative process that would ultimately lead to extinction. It is clear he believed that process was already further along in India, where he claims the British demonstrate “*exhaustion and degeneracy, but not acclimatization*” (60; emphasis original).

Twenty-eight years later, in 1891, the Surgeon General Sir William Moore took the same position in “Is the Colonisation of Tropical Africa by Europeans Possible?”, a paper he delivered at a meeting of the Epidemiological Society of London and which was later published in the organization’s transactions. Citing his observations from years working in India (“where the European race dies out”), he also argues that “fair races succeed only in temperate zones” and invariably degenerate in the torrid (29, 33-36). “That fact is,” he writes, “for the white man and his offspring there is no acclimatisation ... in tropical countries” (33). Unsurprisingly, then, Moore answers his titular question with a resounding no. In his view, establishing successful settler colonies anywhere in Africa was out of the question because the climate of the entire continent is “inimical to the European constitution” (38). He articulates this quite clearly in a statement that echoes Hunt’s earlier claims: “It has been shown that European colonisation and propagation have failed in India and in other tropical countries, and there is certainly no reason why, climatic conditions being similar, it can succeed in Africa” (40).

Even as physicians and racial theorists like Moore and Hunt emphasized the incompatibility of tropical places and white races, the British and other colonialists—often the same people who warned of the tropics’ dangers—also justified imperialism in similar racial and evolutionary terms that naturalized white supremacy and colonial practice (Harrison 1-2; Stepan, “Biological” 103; Wear 42). Mitigating the environmental threats of the tropics was thus imperative to ensuring the empire’s success and protecting British citizens from degeneration.

Yes, acclimation was important (as Anderson and Livingstone show), but so was finding ways to shield the body and mind from the degenerative environment and civilize it as much as possible. Although relatively few colonialists believed the tropics would ever be suitable for permanent white settlement, many shared degeneration theorist Eugene Talbot's view that "much may be done ... to render [the] climate more salubrious" (139). As Talbot's statement suggests, colonialists adopted an elaborate system of strategies to protect themselves from tropical degeneration. These efforts fall into three broad categories: those which offered colonialists temporary respite from the environment, those which offered protection from it, and those which strove to alter and subdue it.

For example, administrators and physicians emphasized the necessity of continuously introducing "fresh supplies" of men to the colonies to reinvigorate the population and allow others to return home where they could rest and "repair the degeneracy acquired abroad" before returning for another tour (Stepan, "Biological" 103). The tradition of sending children home to relatives and boarding schools operated on similar logic (I discuss this practice more in chapter five). Adults, they thought, needed time at home to remain British, but children needed to be immersed in the cultural and physical environment of Britain to *become* British. Additionally, colonialists strove to find enclaves—or "niches," as Andrew Wear puts it—in the tropics where the climate was more favorable and they could reproduce the conditions of home (Wear 29, 40). The most famous of these are the hill stations in India, which Kennedy shows were used as sanatoria "for physical relief ... [and] social and psychological reprieve" intended to stave off disease and degeneration (1, 12). These practices were essentially pastoral retreats like the country holidays promoted to urban dwellers at home. They all removed British citizens from degenerative environments and relocated them to healthful ones that would theoretically

counteract any damage acquired from the city or colonies. Indeed, just as advocates of rural holidays championed reprieves to the country as a way to ease the effects of city life on the body, mind, and spirit, colonialists thought sojourns in the homeland or temperate enclaves and removing children from the tropics altogether were essential to staving off corporeal, psychological, and cultural degeneration and therefore ensuring the empire's success.

Colonists also developed methods to protect themselves from the environment while they were in lowland tropical areas. Wear puts it this way: "An elaborate way of life that kept the excesses of the Indian climate and environment at bay was instituted and socially reproduced ... to ensure that British constitutions remained British" (39). Although here Wear refers specifically to India, his point applies to all of Britain's equatorial colonies, especially since they adopted similar practices regardless of location. India, Africa, the Caribbean islands: they viewed each of these places as the same—dangerous, and a source of degeneration. Physicians such as W.J. Simpson thus prescribed strict habits of physical and moral hygiene to ward off disease, torpidity, sexual immorality, alcoholism, and other symptoms of degeneration in any tropical environment (Livingstone 109; Stepan, "Biological" 102; Wear 39). Simpson's handbook, *The Maintenance of Health in the Tropics* (first edition 1905), is just one of many documents published throughout the era of high colonialism that detail ways the British and other Europeans could shield themselves from the heat, humidity, and other dangers like snakes and parasites. Among other things, such publications established rigid standards for attire, architecture, sanitation, diet, even social functions and outdoor safety (Wear 39).

At the same time, the British worked to improve tropical environments with an eye toward making them both healthier and more productive (Adams 22-24; Bewell 36-43; Wear 29, 40). These efforts, like those directed at indigenous populations, aimed to civilize tropical

nature—i.e., make it conform to Eurocentric ideals and interests—and bring it under colonial control. Indeed, Edward Said reminds us that imperialism and colonialism are partly about controlling land (or natural resources) as well as people, and both are bolstered by “impressive ideological formation that include notions that certain territories and people *require* and beseech domination” (7, 9, original emphasis). Similarly, William M. Adams explains, the belief that nature could be altered “to serve human needs and desires” was a key component of colonialism; in fact, it justified it (22-23). Remaking wild and unproductive environments by clearing forests, instituting European agricultural and sanitation systems, and so forth was understood as a central part of the white man’s burden to spread modernity, civilization, and Christianity throughout the world (Adams and Mulligan 3). While the domination and reordering of tropical nature was ostensibly for the natives’ benefit, it ultimately served colonialists’ economic interests, aesthetic preferences, and health requirements. As the work of Alfred Crosby, Richard Drayton, and other environmental historians have shown, colonialism had significant environmental impacts, many of which were undoubtedly caused in part by the British and other colonizers’ attempts to transform tropical places into, if not exactly “white lands,” at least places they could rule without degenerating and sacrificing their supposed racial superiority.<sup>21</sup> Like urban reformers worked to bring nature into the city, colonizers worked to bring Britain to the tropics so they could remain British.

### **Degeneration, the Environment, and Victorian and Edwardian Literature**

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<sup>21</sup> For more on the colonization of tropical nature, see also Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (second edition, 2004); Richard Drayton, *Nature’s Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the “Improvement” of the World* (2000); and Val Plumwood, “Decolonizing Relationships with Nature” (2003).

These ideas found expression in Victorian and Edwardian literature, which frequently engages evolution, degeneration, and other contemporary innovations in science and medicine—including those related to issues of ecology and environment. As Gillian Beer and George Levine’s groundbreaking research from the 1980s and subsequent studies reveal, evolutionary theory influenced literary content, form, and structure; in turn, literature helped shape the reading public’s understanding of evolution and its social implications.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, work by literary historians including William Greenslade, Kelly Hurley, Nicholas Ruddick, and Stephan Karschay shows that degeneration was an irresistible subject for many authors and influenced generic trends.<sup>23</sup> For instance, Hurley argues convincingly that degeneration helped spark the revival of Gothic fiction at the fin de siècle. Ruddick contends that evolution and degeneration inspired a spike in the publication of fantastic fiction more generally, a “transhistorical fictional *mode*” that encompasses many genres, including the Gothic, folk and fairy tales, and utopian fantasy (189; emphasis original). Fantastic fiction offers authors more imaginative flexibility than realism, which allowed writers such as Robert Louis Stevenson, H.G. Wells, and H. Rider Haggard to depict the monstrous extremes of evolution and degeneration (Ruddick 190; Beer 114). That is not to say realist authors did not bother with degeneration or Social Darwinism;

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<sup>22</sup> The books I reference here are *Darwin’s Plots* (Beer, 1983) and *Darwin and the Novelists* (1988). Cannon Schmitt correctly points out that they remain touchstones for scholars working on Victorian literature and evolution (23). They have helped inspire a huge body of work (including Schmitt’s own *Darwin and the Memory of the Human: Evolution, Savages, and South America* [2009]).

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Pick’s study of degeneration includes a chapter on English fiction, but literature is not his primary focus. The work I reference here is specifically on literature—namely fiction—and degeneration.

scholars including Greenslade have shown that realist novels like George Gissing's *The Nether World* (1889) stoked fears of biological and cultural decline just as well.<sup>24</sup>

In recent years, scholars have begun using ecocriticism in earnest to “study ... the relationship between literature and the physical environment” during the Victorian period and immediately thereafter (Glotfelty xviii). Part of environmental literary studies' movement beyond its original emphasis on traditional nature writing, this emergent body of work reveals that Victorian and early twentieth-century British literature has much to say about ecology and the environment, even that which is not explicitly about either (such as the novels I examine here). For example, Alan MacDuffie looks at representations of energy and anxieties about ecological limits in Victorian literature, while Jesse Oak Taylor parses the significance of the London fog's omnipresence in urban fiction.

MacDuffie and Taylor both discuss urban degeneration briefly within the terms of their larger arguments, focusing on its manifestations in very select works of fin de siècle Gothic fiction (MacDuffie reads *The Time Machine*; Taylor looks primarily at *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*). Like I do, they see degenerationism as a reaction to changing environmental circumstances and understandings of the human. MacDuffie also links it to concerns about waning industrial, biological, and national “energy” and waste. He argues that degenerates were ultimately depicted as waste or pollutants who were themselves “the *source* of the [city's] contamination, rather than the victims of a degraded environment” (225; original emphasis). His analysis is astute, but overlooks the significant strain of degenerationism I discussed earlier that identified the condition as reversible and its foremost cause the polluted,

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<sup>24</sup> Greenslade discusses degeneration in a number of realist novels, including *The Nether World* and several other of Gissing's books.

denatured environment—not bloodlines. Taylor understands urban degeneration similarly, arguing that the theory focused on the consequences of long-term “exposure to unnatural circumstances” (ch. 4). Moreover, he rightly points out, “the urban degenerate was understood to be a new or emergent species, produced by a genuinely novel habitat . . . the metropolis” (ch. 4). In our era of climate change and other rampant environmental crises that have and will continue to have profound implications for human health and identity, Taylor sees degenerationism as a cautionary lesson in “how *not* to inhabit the Anthropocene” (ch. 4; original emphasis).

My dissertation builds on this scholarship by placing degeneration at the center of an ecocritical inquiry into Victorian and Edwardian fiction. It consequently joins other work that charts the relationships between the material environment, the ecological imagination, and literary production. I began this research after noticing a distinct pattern across several novels from the mid-Victorian to Edwardian periods. These novels now form the backbone of this study: *The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby*, *The Princess and the Goblin*, *The Time Machine*, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, and *The Secret Garden*. In each, a single character or group degenerates upon exposure to an unhealthy, unnatural place. What, I wanted to know, gave rise to and unites these disparate narratives? What does reading these novels ecocritically tell us about the Victorians’ attitudes toward and treatment of different environments? In other words, what do they reveal about the Victorian ecological imagination and environmental praxis?

The principal argument of “Degeneration and the Environment in Victorian and Edwardian Fiction” stems from that initial observation: the concept of environmentally-driven degeneration and its inverse—improvements or development caused by the environment—made possible a new kind of fiction that depicts those very processes. These novels each feature degenerative environments which alter human (specifically British) bodies and minds for the



worse. All but Wells' dark scientific romances counter those with pastoral places of health and healing that restore degenerates to their proper states. For example, in Kingsley's evolutionary fairy tale *The Water-Babies*, the protagonist, Tom, begins the novel as a ne'er-do-well child whose body, mind, and soul have been blackened by the city's grime. His time as a water-baby in the pure English rivers resets his development, bringing him health and good character.

My ecocritical approach to these novels is partly informed by geocriticism, a related field dedicated to the "real and imaginary spaces of literature" or what Robert T. Tally, Jr. calls "literary cartographies" (Tally, "Introduction"; "On Literary Cartography"). Specifically, I take inspiration from Sten Pultz Moslund's description of a geocritical approach to literature: "this is a reading not for the plot but for the setting, where the setting of the story is not reduced to an expendable passive or ornamental backdrop for the story's action. Rather, place is experienced as one of the primary events of the story and any action is experienced as being shaped, at least partially, by the event of space" ("Presencing"). As the following chapters show, the settings of these novels—their literary cartographies—are not incidental. They are integral to their plots and themes.

By figuring characters who have degenerated upon exposure to an environment unnatural and foreign to them, these novels implicitly reinforce the belief that British citizens belong to the British countryside and give voice to the topophobia inherent in theories of tropical and urban degeneration.<sup>25</sup> They speak of a people grappling to come to terms with the implications of evolution at a moment when changing conditions at home and aggressive colonial expansion across the globe separated huge numbers of the population from the ancestral landscape—or

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<sup>25</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines topophobia as "a morbid dread of certain places." I use it here to evoke the opposite of *topophilia*, Yi-Fu Tuan's term for love and attachment to place.

“ethnoscape,” to use Anthony D. Smith’s term—which they believed bestowed them with their distinctive racial and cultural characteristics. They also tacitly legitimize degeneration science, since each suggests that exposure to unnatural conditions, whatever they may be, will help facilitate biological degeneration that leads to cultural, moral, and national decay.

These novels share a concern with the implications of environmentally-driven degeneration on the future, and, to varying degrees, can be read as literary interventions into the perceived degeneracy crisis. Wells quite clearly makes a political statement about the condition of London and its poor in *The Time Machine*; *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, I argue, more covertly suggests that the tropics cause madness and biological breakdown. The children’s novels—*The Water-Babies*, *The Princess and the Goblin*, and *The Secret Garden*—show children and adult readers the consequences of exposure to both unhealthy, unnatural environments and pastoral British places, thus reinforcing contemporary parenting advice that recommended placing children in clean, British nature to avoid raising degenerates. As such, they are key artifacts of the Victorian and Edwardian ecological imagination, revealing to us some of the beliefs and environmental anxieties that helped to shape their environmental practices—many of which, such as the establishment of garden cities or the destruction of tropical forests, had effects that are still with us today.

## Chapter Two

### Natural Law, Punitive Evolution, and the City in *The Water-Babies: A Fairy-Tale for a Land Baby*

Since Jonathan Bate's seminal study *Romantic Ecology* (1991), environmental literary critics and humanists usually credit the Romantics for inspiring the rise of modern environmentalism in Britain during the nineteenth century. However, the Victorians' fear of biological decline also motivated its development. In England especially, the belief that the industrial city and modern ways of life were causing the poor—in particular—to degenerate fueled pastoral sentiment, and inspired sustained efforts to improve the urban environment, reconnect the lower classes with the countryside (and consequently reinvigorate it), and to teach the same population habits and morals associated with rural virtue. One Victorian who undertook such reform efforts was Charles Kingsley, an early and influential degenerationist whose writing highlights the connection between degenerationism and proto-environmentalism in the Victorian era.

An Anglican minister, writer, historian, and naturalist, Kingsley was a prominent member of the Christian Socialists. He championed muscular Christianity, sanitary reform, and the pursuit of science in the name of British racial and national progress. Inspired partly by the work of Thomas Carlyle and Frederick Denison Maurice, Kingsley became concerned with class politics and the sanitation crisis as a young man in the 1840s.<sup>26</sup> He subsequently wrote three condition-of-England or social problem novels—*Yeast: A Problem* (1848), *Alton Locke* (1850),

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<sup>26</sup> On this subject, see the chapters on the formation of Kingsley's political and religious beliefs and his early career in J.M.I Klaver's biography, *The Apostle of the Flesh: A Critical Life of Charles Kingsley* (2006).

and *Two Years Ago* (1857)—which helped establish his literary and political reputation in the 1850s. They reveal that even early in his career Kingsley thought the poor by and large failed to meet the English racial standard. In *Yeast*, for example, the protagonist trains an ethnographic eye on a group of “stupid, beery” townsfolk and feels dismay that they are “evidently rather a degraded than an undeveloped race” (188-189).

It is well known that Kingsley was also a staunch imperialist who believed the English were the world’s preeminent race.<sup>27</sup> In his writing, he frequently portrays them as God’s chosen people and flaunts their racial fitness to justify colonial aggression. As Patrick Brantlinger points out of Kingsley’s historical novels specifically, a great portion of his work “offers as its central theme the racist and sexist tautology that informs much writing about the Empire throughout the nineteenth century: the English are on top because they are English” (44). Jonathan Conlin draws a similar conclusion about his historical novels and lectures. In them, he argues, Kingsley depicts “the history of Britain as the history of a divinely favoured Teutonic race, one with a mission to subdue the world” (“An Illiberal Descent” 167).

It is therefore unsurprising that in the late 1850s Kingsley—like other Victorians—became preoccupied with the concept of intergenerational racial degeneration, which he also called *degradation*.<sup>28</sup> Conlin likewise dates the beginning of Kingsley’s interest in degradation to around 1860, while Jessica Straley states that his ideas on the subject “were brewing through the 1850s and 1860s” (Conlin, “An Illiberal Descent” 174; Straley, *Evolution* 65). Appalled by the

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<sup>27</sup> There exists an abundance of work on Kingsley’s views on race and empire. Robert J.C. Young, for example, writes about Kingsley in his work, including *The Idea of English Ethnicity* (2008). Other notable scholarship includes Michael Banton’s chapter on Kingsley in *The Idea of Race* (1977) and more recent studies by Jonathan Conlin and Stanwood Walker.

<sup>28</sup> Kingsley alternates between using the terms degradation and degeneration; in this chapter, I do as well.

poverty, amorality, and filth rampant within England's ballooning cities, he worried that modern urban-industrial life would be the downfall of the English and their empire. Until his death in 1875, he wrote prolifically about how the city threatened their racial and political superiority by dragging them toward disease, savagery, and extinction.

His view eventually became commonplace. During the late Victorian and Edwardian years, many British citizens argued that the racial degeneracy caused by unsanitary, unnatural cities and habits was a serious impediment to national progress, although there were always differences in opinion about the severity of the problem, its causes, and how to resolve it. Kingsley's preoccupation with degeneracy anticipates the late Victorian and Edwardian furor over the issue and reveals its origins in mid-century sentiment. Indeed, his increasing concerns correspond to degeneration's ascent into Victorian discourse. He is thus representative of those Victorians for whom degeneration theory legitimized their classist fears about England's cities and their poorest occupants (Arata 17; Greenslade 16-17; Luckin 239-40, 250; Stedman Jones 286, 313). Yet he was far from a passive consumer of the theory. Rather, Kingsley was a prophet of degeneration, an early and significant advocate whose writing from the late 1850s onward fed the nation's burgeoning fixation with the subject.

Although research on degeneration and the Victorian period frequently mentions Kingsley, scholars typically treat him as a marginal figure, not an active, central force in the making of its discourse. Likewise, much work on him at least mentions his interest in degradation, but most of it does not thoroughly consider his place within the larger cult of degenerationism or just how important the theory was to his politics. Key exceptions to this are Straley and Piers J. Hale's studies. Their work begins to show that degeneration was key to Kingsley's ideology and therefore his positions on a range of issues from sanitary reform to

universal education and race, but does not place him within a lineage of other degenerationist writers. Degeneration dominates much of his later writing, including lectures, scientific texts, and the ultimate focus of this chapter: his children's novel *The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby* (1863). This body of work is laden with apocalyptic visions of racial degradation and proto-environmentalist solutions based in his anti-urban, jingoistic, and muscular understanding of Christianity, Englishness, and evolution. In addition to highlighting the connection between degenerationism and efforts to improve the so-called urban residuum through proto-environmentalist reform, this chapter consequently recovers Kingsley as a formative participant in degeneration discourse, a "popularizer" (to use Bernard Lightman's term) whose writing alerted Victorians to the supposed crisis and described how to solve it. In the first section, I introduce Kingsley's views on nature and racial degeneration to set up my analysis of *The Water-Babies*. In the second, I examine the fairy tale alongside selections of his nonfiction writing. I read *The Water-Babies* as Kingsley's fictional treatise on degeneration, arguing furthermore that it inaugurated the genre identified in this study: fiction that engages with post-Morelian, post-Darwinian theories of environmentally-driven degeneration and development.

### **Punitive Evolution**

Kingsley's emergent concern about the possibility of progressive, hereditary decline among the British at the end of the 1850s is evident in a lecture he gave at the first public meeting of the Ladies' National Sanitary Association in July 1859, which was published later as "The Massacre of the Innocents" (F. Kingsley 108). Like his later writing on the subject, the lecture is a blustering, apocalyptic call to action, and therefore speaks to the severity of his fear that degeneration could end the English. In it, he beseeches his audience to aggravate for sanitary reform and teach "the art of health" to people of all classes—but especially the urban poor—so

that every British citizen can fulfill his or her potential as a member of the “finest” race “upon earth” (“Massacre” 258). He argues that “allow[ing] English people to grow up puny, stunted, and diseased” dishonors the race and contradicts both God and nature. In other words, it is a sin, but one committed by the entire nation, not the individual. Consequently, he warns, “outraged Nature” will punish them by slowly killing the population until they learn their lesson or—he insinuates—they are destroyed (265-266).

Later that year, Darwin sent Kingsley a preview copy of *On the Origin of Species* in advance of its November publication. As numerous scholars have noted, the book profoundly affected him. Unlike many Christian leaders, Kingsley enthusiastically adapted Darwin’s theory to reconcile it with Christianity and became one of its most avid supporters (Lightman 43, 75-81; Piers, “Darwin’s Other Bulldog” 979). Already concerned with racial competition and the condition of England’s poor, his interpretation of evolutionary theory fueled the growth of his budding obsession with racial degeneration, which he came to see as punitive evolution.

Kingsley’s understanding of the evolutionary process was rooted in his conception of nature, which ultimately *naturalized* Christianity and British superiority. A proponent of natural theology, he held a proto-ecological, yet decidedly anthropocentric worldview that allowed him to see humans as the world’s preeminent species, but who were nonetheless part of nature and influenced like any other by its forces (Hamlin 258; Wood 234). Essentially, he believed nature is God’s proxy. He argued throughout his career that the physical world is run by a vast system of benevolent, unyielding laws that God established at creation to be his “voice” and “express [his] will” in the world (“Science of Health” 42; “Two Breaths” 64). He consequently dismissed—

albeit with some difficulty—the notion that it is chaotic, cruel, or fallen.<sup>29</sup> In Naomi Wood’s words, he “refused to hold that Nature’s production was ... inhuman, immoral, and wasteful” (237). Instead, he vehemently argued that God designed nature to exalt humankind, but only if they follow its laws (*Town Geology* liii; *Westminster Sermons* viii-x). Breaking any of nature’s laws, he insisted, was a sin that would turn its forces against the sinner(s) and cause any number of imaginable ills such as disease, flooding, and famine.

This argument is prominent in much of his work, including “The Massacre of the Innocents,” where he declares: “Nature is only conquered by obeying her. ... Nature is as fierce when she is offended, as she is bounteous and kind when she is obeyed” (265-66). Similarly, in *Westminster Sermons* he writes: “Premature death, pestilence, and famine ... Man has control of these; they are caused by man’s ignorance and sin, and by his breaking of natural laws” (xiii). Another passage from “Two Breaths” (1869), a lecture on the dangers of improper ventilation, articulates his philosophy of nature in full. In it, he depicts nature as a Janus-faced force, and emphasizes its immense power to help or harm humankind:

he that breaks one physical law is guilty of all. The whole universe, as it were, takes up arms against him; and all nature, with her numberless and unseen powers, is ready to avenge herself on him, and on his children after him, he knows not when nor where. He, on the other hand, who obeys the laws of nature with his whole heart and mind, will find all things working together to him for good. He is at peace with the physical universe. He is helped and befriended alike by the sun

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<sup>29</sup> Will Abberley has recently shown that Kingsley had difficulty maintaining this position later in his life, but that he negotiated nature’s apparent chaos, cruelty, and deceptions by “moralizing” and extolling “the practices of science” (36).



above his head and the dust beneath his feet; because he is obeying the will and mind of Him who made the sun, and dust, and all things; and who has given them a law which cannot be broken. (74)

This definition of nature ultimately allowed Kingsley to reconcile Christianity with evolutionary science since it placed humankind at the center of an ecological system designed to favor us, but with which we come into conflict through conscious and unconscious defiance of its laws and, therefore, God.

Thus, although most Victorian Christians believed evolution was antithetical to their beliefs, it provided Kingsley with further scientific support for Christianity and his racist, imperial convictions. Indeed, he exemplifies how the British and other colonialists at the time used science to justify imperialism and naturalize “racist ways of thinking about human beings and the differences between them” (Loomba 56; see also Stepan, *Idea* 48-60; 66). Unlike Darwin, Huxley, and other materialists, Kingsley thought human evolution is a teleological process guided by beliefs and behavior. As he saw it, races that follow God’s natural laws improve. Those that do not regress or devolve until they disappear; they, in a word, *degrade* (Conlin, “An Illiberal Descent” 174; Hale 553). He therefore used degeneration to explain the discrepancies between civilized, rational Christian races like the English and the so-called savage or otherwise inferior peoples. The former, he theorized, had evolved as God planned; the latter were actively degenerating. They were not what God intended them to be; that is, white and Christian (“The Forest Children” 8; “The Fall” 414-417).<sup>30</sup> This theory of racial decay, Conlin observes, “provided another way in which Kingsley could accept the destruction of races as

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<sup>30</sup> Kingsley’s position was not uncommon; at the time, the consensus among racial scientists was that “[c]ertain races were ... ‘degenerate types’” (Stepan, “Biological” 97).

Providential and join Carlyle and Froude in sneering at what the latter called ‘that weak watery talk of “protection of aborigines”’ (“An Illiberal Descent” 178-179). They were sinners; the white, Christian races were not.

Kingsley articulates his degeneration theory particularly clearly in “The Fall,” an abhorrent sermon in which he blames original sin for racial degradation and savagery. The racist screed illuminates the way in which he construed degeneration—and thus, racial inferiority—as a punishment for living sinfully and used it to other nonwhite, non-Christian peoples on biological and cultural grounds. In the section I excerpt partially below, he discusses the degeneracy of savages at length to impress upon his audience the dangers of sin.<sup>31</sup> Writing in his characteristically unclear, rambling style, he describes what “every thinking man” will see while “look[ing] upon the great nations of savages” (414-415):

[He] sees how, so far from being able to do right if they choose, they go on from father to son, generation after generation, doing wrong more and more, whether they like it or not; how they become more and more children of wrath ... how they become more and more children of darkness, forgetting more and more the laws of right and wrong, becoming stupid and ignorant, until they lose the very knowledge of how to provide themselves with houses, clothes, fire, or even to till the ground, and end in feeding on roots and garbage, like the beasts which perish.

(415)

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<sup>31</sup> The pertinent sections are far too long to quote here, but for those interested in Kingsley’s racism and understanding of human evolution, they are worth reading in full.

Citing Australian Aborigines as his example, Kingsley continues from this point to insist that many races are “falling, generation after generation” further from their original state and will eventually die out because they do not follow God’s natural laws and will not be civilized (416).

Kingsley likewise claimed the English had become the world’s preeminent people because of their obedience to nature and unequalled capacity for reason and science, which they had inherited from their early Christian ancestors (“How to Study” 208; “Science” 235-236). He furthermore cited their supposedly superior scientific talent as one of the key biological characteristics that set the English above other peoples. In his mythic, all-too-familiar portrayal, they were the premier scientific race, a beacon of progress and reason who God wanted to spread science around the world. For example, in an early lecture titled “How to Study Natural History” (1846), he credits science for England’s success and then instructs his audience to carry out their mission to spread reason and scientific progress around the globe. England, he argues, “is the nation which above all others has conquered nature by obeying her” (308). To please God, they must continue “to improve that precious heirloom of science, inventing, producing, exporting, importing, till it seems as if the whole human race, and every land from the equator to the pole must henceforth bear the indelible impress and sign manual of English science” (308). He reiterates his point, further imploring his audience to fulfill their calling:

[The] study of natural history is the grammar of that very physical science which has enabled England thus to replenish the earth and subdue it. Do you not see, then, that by following these studies you are walking in the very path to which England owes her wealth; that you are training in yourselves that habit of mind which God has approved as the one which He has ordained for Englishmen, and are doing what in you lies toward carrying out, in after life, the glorious work

which God seems to have laid on the English race, to replenish the earth and subdue it? (308)

But while Kingsley insisted that their obedience to the twinned laws of God and nature had lifted the English to the pinnacle of racial development, he simultaneously feared modern urban life and the industrialized environment placed them in danger of degenerating like Ireland's "white chimpanzees" or the "brutish" "South Sea Islanders" (qtd. in F. Kingsley, 125; "The Fall" 416). Indeed, he thought the urban poor already *were* degenerating, and that they needed to stop the process before it spread to other classes and became irreparable. This is clear in much of his later writing, which elaborates on the nascent arguments in "The Massacre of the Innocents" by naming degeneration more explicitly as the root of England's problems and the coming plague that could destroy them.

Take, for instance, "The Science of Health" (1874), an essay based on a lecture Kingsley gave at the Midland Institute in Birmingham. As Straley astutely observes, it encapsulates his fears "about the physical well-being of his fellow countrymen" and his stance on degeneration (*Evolution* 65). In it, he claims the "British race is ... degenerating" because most people live in cities that misshape their bodies and minds such that they are driven to vices like alcohol and birth children who grow up to become worse than they. His ultimate point is that the English are degenerating because they are living *unnaturally*, which to him, of course, was the same as living *sinfully*.

Since he believed English degeneracy stemmed from living in conflict with nature, Kingsley consequently promoted science as a patriotic duty. He insisted it would help them know God better and bring them in ever closer concert with nature so they could harness it, avoid degeneration, and reach their full potential (Straley, *Evolution* 58, 66). This argument is

particularly apparent in his scientific texts such as *Town Geology* and *Madame How and Lady Why* (1869), which exemplify a kind of nature writing that blends natural theology with instruction in natural history and the sciences. For instance, in the preface to *Town Geology*, he depicts the study of science as a religious and patriotic duty, entreating his British reader to learn about natural history so they may “conquer nature by obeying her” and therefore “wield for the benefit of man [its] bruet [sic] forces” (xli, xlv). He furthermore declares: “The more you know of physical science, the more you will know the works and of the will of God” (xlvii-xlviii).

He simultaneously outlined a proto-environmentalist, pastoral vision for sanitary reform that closely resembles the agendas of later reformers like Octavia Hill and Reginald Brabazon, as well as back-to-nature advocates such as John Ruskin. Indeed, since Kingsley thought degeneration was caused by the unnatural circumstances of modern English life, he—like many of his contemporaries and reformers through the Edwardian era—resorted to conservative, pastoral logic that glorified the vanishing traditions of country life. He argued that to halt and reverse English degeneration they needed in part to reunite the urban working class population with the nature that helped make the English great initially: the pure air, bountiful open spaces, and picturesque scenery of the countryside. He consequently advocated for sweeping environmental changes that included, but were not limited to, the abolition of slums and establishment of suburban housing and public parks. I discuss Kingsley’s proto-environmentalist campaign against English degeneracy more in my reading of *The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby*, to which this chapter now turns.

### **Kingsley’s Degeneration Treatise**

Published serially in *Macmillan’s Magazine* from 1862 to 1863 (when it appeared in bound form), *The Water-Babies* follows the moral and physical transformation of Tom, an

abused, degenerate chimney sweep who is transformed into a newt-like water-baby after he drowns in a river. Through his submersion in the natural world and various encounters with the underwater inhabitants—including maternal fairies who represent natural law—Tom eventually learns his beliefs and behaviors determine his physical form. At the end of the novel, he becomes obedient to nature, his soul is washed clean, and he reemerges as a fit, Christian “man of science” (*Water-Babies* 188).

In her seminal study, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Gillian Beer asserts that *The Water-Babies* “mythologizes Darwinian theory with remarkable insight” (128). Although Kingsley interpreted Darwinian theory more loosely than Beer’s statement suggests, the observation raises a fundamental point about the novel: it is an evolutionary allegory. Hale calls it an “evolutionary parable” (“Chance” 560). Much criticism on *The Water-Babies* consequently proceeds from this point, focusing on its allegorical commentary on evolutionary concepts and debate, including degeneration. Its message is unequivocally clear: those who follow nature’s laws evolve progressively. Those who do not develop incorrectly and degenerate.

This reading of the novel extends the work of those scholars like Beer, Hale, and more who have previously noted degeneration’s prominent role in it, but for whom it is not the primary focus. *The Water-Babies* is an evolutionary parable, but it is also a fictional treatise intended—much like Kingsley’s earlier social-problem novels—to influence the body politic. Through the story of Tom’s physical, moral, and spiritual metamorphosis, the fairy tale crystallizes Kingsley’s views on degeneration and offers both its adult and child reader a model

for how to allay and altogether avoid it.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, despite the narrator's frequent jabs at morals and take-away messages, the novel's episodes nonetheless contain lessons that show children how to avoid degeneracy, and adults what children need to become fit English citizens.

Straley sees *The Water-Babies* similarly, arguing that in it Kingsley "develops a pedagogical program for his protagonist capable of reforming society's least fit ... into able minds and bodies" (*Evolution* 58). She claims it presents evolutionary recapitulation as the solution for "social degeneration" (68):

The answer for Kingsley lay in the theory of evolutionary recapitulation: the idea that the development of the individual repeats the evolution of the species. By transforming Tom into an amphibious eft (a baby newt), *The Water-Babies* rewinds the process of human civilization that has rendered him a foolish and feeble chimney sweep and begins his evolutionary process anew in order to ensure a more successful maturation. Only by recapitulating, reviewing a 'natural' education as he travels downriver, can Tom finally become a man. *The Water-Babies* does not so much claim that children naturally *do* recapitulate the evolution of the species as it suggests that they systematically *should* in order to ensure a healthier, fitter, and nobler human future. (58; original emphasis)

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<sup>32</sup> Whether Kingsley intended the novel for child or adult audiences has been the subject of some critical debate (see, for example, Caroline Sumpter's *The Victorian Press and the Fairy Tale* [2008] and Jonathan Padley's essay in *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* [Spring 2009]). Like Straley and many others, I set aside questions of intent and recognize that *The Water-Babies* had a dual audience (Straley, *Evolution* 75-76). Adult readers would have encountered it first in *Macmillan's Magazine*, but it was widely embraced as a children's story.

Analyzing the novel alongside Spencerian pedagogy, Victorian educational debates, and theories of the animal child, Straley thus suggests it presents a model of the natural, religious, and literary education Kingsley thought necessary for children to leave behind their animal origins and become human (67, 85).

Given its tight focus on evolutionary recapitulation and education, Straley's excellent discussion of *The Water-Babies* provides only a partial account of the novel's commentary on degeneration. Education was a key part of Kingsley's plan for ensuring England's continued racial and political excellence because he thought it would help more people live in accordance with God and nature's wishes, but he believed much more was necessary to prevent their racial and political deterioration. Indeed, the pedagogical program Straley identifies in the novel is just one aspect of his campaign to fight degeneration. True to his arguments elsewhere, in *The Water-Babies*, Kingsley also attacks the economic and industrial conditions which necessitate Tom's recapitulation, extending a decidedly pastoral *environmental* argument regarding urban-industrial squalor's impact on the child and nature's beneficial influence on development. Tom, it is important to recall, is not born degenerate. His social and material environment makes him so. Indeed, the novel suggests English children cannot mature to their racial potential—to become fully human, fully English—when they are subjected to the impure conditions of the impoverished urban environment, which fosters ill health and amoral behavior that weakens the body, mind, and soul. To learn nature's lessons and develop correctly, *The Water-Babies* argues, children must be immersed in a healthy, natural environment.

Kingsley opens the novel with the first two stanzas of Wordsworth's "Lines Written in Early Spring" (1798), which concludes with the speaker grieving "What man has made of man" (line 8). The epigraph is fitting, as it primes the reader to meet Tom, a pitiful child who is made



so by societal neglect, abuse, and the city. Indeed, although the opening words (“Once upon a time”) signal to the reader that she will encounter a fairy tale, Kingsley immediately flouts the genre’s tradition of telling ahistorical, geographically ambiguous stories (1). Instead, he grounds the reader in England’s industrial north and three pressing social issues bound up in degeneration: child welfare, sanitation, and the amoral urban adult.

Tom, the narrator explains, “was a little chimney sweep” who “lived in a great town in the North country, where there were plenty of chimneys to sweep, and plenty of money for Tom to earn and his master to spend” (1). He does not know how to wash himself (“for there was no water” with which to do so) or pray. He has “never heard of God, or of Christ;” he is illiterate (1). His body is marred from malnutrition and chimney sweeping, which has left his “knees and elbows raw” and his eyes full of soot (1). He has been imprisoned twice (3). Although the narrator and reader know Tom’s condition is abnormal and unacceptable, he knows nothing else. He takes his circumstances as inevitable and even natural, which is critical to Kingsley’s construction of him as a hapless victim: “As for chimney sweeping, and being hungry, and being beaten, he took all that for the way of the world, like the rain and snow and thunder” (2).

Tom’s master, the appropriately named Mr. Grimes, represents the quintessential urban degenerate and what Tom will become. He is an alcoholic criminal with poor hygiene who beats Tom frequently, feeds him little, and forces him to work constantly. Regardless, Tom knows no better and looks up to him as a model of masculinity, dreaming of the day he will become like him:

[he] thought of the fine things coming, when he would be a man, and a master sweep, and sit in the public house with a quart of beer and a long pipe, and play cards for silver money, and wear velveteens and ankle-jacks ... like a man. And

he would have apprentices, one, two, three if he could. How he would bully them, and knock them about, just as his master did to him; and make them carry home the soot sacks, while he rode before them on his donkey with a pipe in his mouth and a flower in his buttonhole, like a king at the head of his army. (2)

Here Kingsley relies on his readers' knowledge of how a man *should* behave (that is, abstain from drink, gambling, and abuse), subtly pointing out that Grimes has bestowed in Tom a perverse understanding of manhood that has profound somatic and psychological effects. It also establishes a lineage for such degenerate men, suggesting not just that Tom will become like Grimes, but that he will likewise foul his apprentices. Presumably, too, someone led Grimes astray, and Tom's future apprentices will do the same to theirs.

The passage consequently raises another important point about the novel: its investment in the future. Although the action occurs in the present, the narrative is implicitly concerned with the effects of the present on the future—Tom's future, the nation's future, and even humankind's future. As Wood points out, "Tom is not just a pathetic victim, but a type representing the begrimed social body of the English working class" (240). More specifically, he represents the *degenerate* class created by the industrialized, amoral, and unnatural city. *The Water-Babies* thus exemplifies the way Victorian narratives about biological and resultant cultural decay tend to focus on the individual degenerate. In fiction, medical writing, and elsewhere, figures like Tom symbolize the deteriorating, unfit masses (Pick 224). They are harbingers of a degenerate future filled with abhorrent, aberrant citizens. *The Water-Babies* is therefore about Tom, but it is also very much not. It is about who he will become and the countless others just like him—physically and mentally unfit miscreants who Kingsley and his peers feared would drag the English down.

His story consequently charts the course by which Kingsley thought they could ensure a fit future.

Since Tom's salvation depends on him escaping Grimes and the city, and immersing himself in nature, the story begins with a pastoral retreat that introduces him to the world beyond his smoke-filled home and a way of being other than what Grimes has shown him. One day, a groom visits Grimes and hires him to come the following day to clean the chimneys at Sir John Harthover's country estate. Tom knows almost nothing about the country, and what little he does know comes from the stories he has heard (he believes deer are "monsters who were in the habit of eating children") and from seeing the pheasants Grimes and his friends sometimes poached (he "wondered what they tasted like") (3). Still, he is excited to see the estate, which he instinctively believes is "the most wonderful" place "upon earth" (3).

Kingsley's construction of Tom draws upon the pervasive Romantic idea that children possess an intrinsic affinity and need for nature. It also reinforces that notion. Tom's transformation begins immediately after he and Grimes leave the city, a detail that furthermore reflects Kingsley's contention in lectures like "Great Cities and their Influence for Good and Evil" (1857) that even short forays in nature have a soothing, rejuvenating effect on a person's physical and mental state. As the filth of the city gradually disappears, Tom marvels at the landscape. The world appears before him clean, peaceful, and engaging. Like the Wordsworthian child, he yearns to immerse himself in nature:

They passed through the pitmen's village, all shut up and silent now; and through the turnpike; and then they were out in the real country, and plodding along the black dusty road, between black slag walls, with no sound but the groaning and thumping of the pit engine in the next field. But soon the road grew white, and the

walls likewise; and at the wall's foot grew long grass and gay flowers, all drenched with dew; and instead of the groaning of the pit engine, they heard the skylark saying his matins high up in the air ...

All else was silent. For old Mrs. Earth was still fast asleep; and, like many pretty people, she looked still prettier asleep than awake. ...

On they went; and Tom looked, and looked, for he had never been so far into the country before; and longed to get over a gate, and pick buttercups, and look for birds' nests in the hedge. (5)

The emphasis Kingsley places on how the physical and aural pollutants of the city gradually disappear, replaced by the sweet sights and sounds of the unadulterated countryside, works to shore up the distinction between the city and the country. Furthermore, Tom's innate desire to commune with nature suggests that the country, not the "great town" where he lives, is the healthy and *natural* place for English citizens to develop.

The novel's preoccupation with the debilitating, degrading effects of the city and the positive effects of the country on the human body and spirit reflects the arguments Kingsley laid out in his public lectures and essays. As I have already begun to show in the previous section, he vigorously preached that the conditions of Victorian cities incite physical and mental degradation that worsens with each generation and results in amorality, spiritual malaise, and general unfitness. In "The Tree of Knowledge," he argues that man is not meant to live in industrial, urban squalor—it is unnatural, a sin against God and nature that wears on health and morals. "Let any rational man," he writes in an illuminating passage,

Fresh from the country—in which I presume God, having made it, meant all men, more or less, to live—go through the back streets of any city, or through whole districts of the ‘black countries’ of England; and then ask himself: Is it the will of God that His human children should live and toil there without contracting a probably diseased habit of body; without contracting a certainly dull, weary, sordid habit of mind, which craves for any pleasure, however brutal, to escape from its own stupidity and emptiness? (175)

While Kingsley suggests here that the material conditions of the city have a direct effect on morality, he makes that point explicit in “Great Cities and their Influence for Good and Evil.” He states, “the moral state of a city depends ... on the physical state of that city; on the food, water, air, and lodging of its inhabitants” (191).

In both lectures, he cites alcoholism as a key example of the city’s poisonous effects on body and mind, thus emphasizing the causal relationship he identified between the environment, health, and morality. The primary causes of alcoholism, he asserts, are “Bad air and bad lodging,” which impairs the body and makes it crave “the passing stimulus of alcohol” (“Great Cities” 201-202). He elaborates on this claim in the later “The Tree of Knowledge,” tying it explicitly to degeneration. Alcoholism itself, he claims, is not a disease. Rather, it is a symptom of “growing degeneracy” amongst England’s urban population. The following excerpt could easily fit into Morel or another degeneration theorist’s writing:

The craving for drink and narcotics, especially that engendered in our great cities, is not a disease, but a symptom of a disease; of a far deeper disease than any which drunkenness can produce; namely, of the growing degeneracy of a population striving in vain by stimulants and narcotics to fight against those slow

poisons with which our greedy barbarism, miscalled civilization, has surrounded them from cradle to the grave. (175-176)

Kingsley makes it clear, however, that he sees alcoholism as just one consequence of living in urban squalor and, therefore, against natural law. The same conditions that cause men to drink excessively (“bad light, bad air, bad food, bad water, bad smells, bad occupations”) he argues weaken the individual and leave them vulnerable to disease (175). The preceding passage demonstrates Kingsley’s concern with the effects of unnatural, polluted environments on the individual and—more importantly—generations particularly clearly. Like Morel and other theorists of degeneration, he believed degenerative symptoms like weakness and lethargy would intensify with each generation until the “whole population may become permanently degraded” (“Science of Health” 26).

In “The Science of Health” and similar writing, Kingsley consequently established his plan for quelling England’s degeneration crisis and rejuvenating the population. As Straley shows, he called in part for educational programs that would help people please nature and subsequently “eliminate the germs of hereditary disease, and . . . actually regenerate the human system” (“Science of Health” 31; Straley, *Evolution* 65-67). His solution was partly rooted in the principles of paternalism, and involved showing the poor the error of their ways and teaching them hygiene. To wit, he called for reformers to inspire among them both shame and aspiration. He wished to show the poor that “they are the arbiters of their own destinies; and, to a fearfully large degree, of their children’s destinies after them” (42). He hoped to make them “discontented” with their and their children’s “physical frame[s]” and their slovenly homes, and impress upon them what they could be by showing them “those precious heirlooms of the human race, the statues the old Greeks” (42).

He nevertheless also advocated for solutions that resemble some of the key goals of contemporary environmental justice activists, which serves as a reminder of how those we now recognize as proto-environmentalists were frequently motivated by classist efforts to control the poor.<sup>33</sup> He insisted everyone should have healthy living and workplace conditions, as well as access to good food, water, air, and large parks where the public could play sports and commune with nature. Essentially, Kingsley felt so strongly that the Victorian city was an unnatural place for people to live that he called for England to completely restructure their urban environments. In “Great Cities and their Influence for Good and Evil,” he imagines a future where no one lives in cities and they are merely centers of industry and labor. Eventually, he argues, the English will have “to build better things than cities” (215). The vision he describes clearly illustrates the pastoral logic underlying Kingsley’s ideas regarding the physical environment’s broad-ranging effects on the English. He writes:

They will issue a complete interpenetration of city and country, a complete fusion of their different modes of life, and a combination of the advantages of both, such as no country in the world has ever seen. We shall have ... model lodging-houses springing up, not in the heart of town, but on the hills around it; and these will be ... not ill-built rows of undrained cottages ... but huge blocks of building, each with its common eating-house, bar, baths, washhouses ... where, in *free and pure country air*, the workman will enjoy comforts which our own grandfathers could

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<sup>33</sup> This is still a largely understudied issue in England’s environmental history, but Peter Thorsheim’s *Inventing Pollution: Coal, Smoke, and Culture in Britain since 1800* touches on this issue. Sarah Jaquette Ray’s study of American environmentalism, eugenics, and other social-control efforts, *The Ecological Other: Environmental Exclusion in American Culture*, also offers points that apply to a British context.

not command ... lines will convey the men to or from their work by railroad, without loss of time, labour, or health.

Then the city will become what it ought to be; the *workshop, not the dwelling house*, of a *mighty and healthy* people. The old foul alleys, as they become gradually depopulated, will be replaced by fresh warehouses, fresh public buildings; and the city, in spite of all its smoke and dirt, will become a place on which the workman will look down with pride and joy, because it will be to him no longer a prison and a *poison-trap*, but merely a place for honest labour. (215-217; emphasis added)

The suburban fantasy Kingsley describes here allows him to have his cake and eat it too, since it reconciles his beliefs that natural law compelled the English to live in the clean countryside *and* be industrious and imperial (217). Furthermore, as his writing on the relationship between the city and degenerate behaviors like drinking suggest, a healthful suburban habitat would encourage physical health, religious feeling, and good habits. In short, it would help people live more natural, less sinful lives that would transform them individually and *en masse*, thus allowing the English to fulfill their racial potential.

Tom's transformation in *The Water-Babies* dramatizes the process of redirecting an individual's development by removing them from the urban environment, immersing them in healthful nature, and teaching them to live by God and nature's twinned laws. Before he escapes Grimes and the city, Tom is at the whim of the unnatural, sinful forces within it; he cannot develop correctly. His violent immersion in the natural world, however, figuratively and literally cleanses him, resetting his developmental trajectory and helping him learn to obey God and nature so he can fulfill his racial potential. Consequently, the novel allegorizes the necessity of



living in harmony with natural laws by showing how the environment—for better or worse—influences Tom. As he leaves behind the detrimental influences of the city, nature acts on Tom, gradually healing his body and teaching him to act in the ways that allow him to become an Englishman.

In the first chapter, Kingsley dwells on his descriptions of Tom's filthiness, drawing on grime's metaphorical associations with sin and non-white bodies. However, he also emphasizes that it is filth that makes Tom sinful and savage. Conlin argues that Kingsley believed "the body was a faithful representation of the soul" (*Evolution* 120), but he also thought physical influences like filth, air, and water affected both. The soul, *The Water-Babies* suggests, cannot be clean if the body is subjected to a materially and socially unclean environment. The filth on Tom's body may be a byproduct of his occupation and an outward reflection of his ignorance, class, and the industrial city, but it has also become part of his body and character. It is him. Subject to the moral and physical degeneration of the unsanitary and amoral conditions forced upon him, the novel suggests Tom has become soot. Moreover, like soot, he is waste, a racialized, savage "street Arab" like the children Kingsley describes in "Human Soot" (1870). Delivered to the Kirkdale Ragged Schools, the lecture focuses on child labor practices and identifies poor working children as the human waste of industry, or the "human soot" created by industrial malpractice. He argues furthermore that those children—who Tom clearly represents—contribute to the worsening intellect, health, and physical form of the poorest classes and therefore constitute a serious threat to the nation.

While Tom is cleaning the chimneys at the Harthover home, he finds himself in the daughter Ellie's room, where she is sleeping. There, looking upon her clean, white form, he recognizes himself as filthy for the first time. His thoughts come rapidly, suggesting the

overwhelming nature of the encounter: “No. She cannot be dirty. She never could have been dirty, thought Tom to himself. And then he thought, “And are all people like that when they are washed?” (14). Confronted with Ellie, a paragon of cleanliness, Tom looks down at his blackened wrist, “and tried to rub the soot off, and wondered whether it ever would come off” (14). It dawns on him that he could perhaps be like her: ““Certainly I should look much prettier ... if I grew at all like her”” (14). His curiosity turns to panic and despair when he turns around and comes face-to-face with a threatening figure, which he quickly realizes is his reflected image. “And looking round,” the narrator explains, “he suddenly saw, standing lose to him, a little ugly, black, ragged figure, with bleared eyes and grinning white teeth. He turned on it angrily. What did such a little black ape want in that sweet young lady’s room? And behold, it was himself, reflected in a great mirror” (14). The racial implications of this passage have been thoroughly discussed, but notice the way the grime marring Tom’s whiteness is part of somatic identity—the soot does not easily rub off. Indeed, as Tom recognizes himself as dirty, the scene pushes the reader to see him for what he is: an uneducated, unclean, and racially degenerate chimney sweep who—despite his age—is a sexual threat. By figuring Tom as both dirty and simian, Kingsley suggests not just that he is racially other, but that he is not quite human. He is a beast standing in the angel’s bedroom. The moment therefore folds together blackness, filth, and beastliness as mutually constitutive threats to the white Christian body—his and, importantly, Ellie’s. Seeing himself for the first time, Tom is ashamed and angry, and turns away “to sneak up the chimney again and hide” from himself and those who can see his blackened, simian body (14).

While filth is both the cause and outward expression of Tom’s degeneration, water represents purity and performs the baptismal cleansing he needs to begin his development afresh.

He is drawn to it even before he and Grimes reach Harthover Estate. Soon after all traces of the city disappear and Tom yearns to “pick buttercups,” a poor Irish woman joins them on their journey (the reader later learns she is Mother Cary, a fairy who represents natural law). She tells Tom about the sea, and he yearns to see and bathe in it (6). When Grimes stops to dip his aching, hungover head in a roadside stream, Tom sees “how very dirty he made it,” but he also wants to put his own head in the water. Grimes beats him when he does (7). Tom’s desire to clean himself and the shame he later feels in Ellie’s presence are important, as both register his instinctual, yet latent, desire to live a pure, natural life and develop correctly.

Kingsley thought all English children were full of potential and instinctually ecophilic, pure, and in tune with the laws of hygiene. In “Great Cities and their Influence for Good and Evil,” he argues that unsanitary conditions at home and work destroy a child’s self-respect and contribute directly to their psychological, moral, and physical degradation. A child may have no place to wash himself, he explains, “but he has enough of the innate sense of beauty and fitness to feel that he ought not to be dirty; thinks that others despise him for being dirty, and he half despises himself for being so” (187). Thus, he insists, “In all ... reformatories ... the first step toward restoring self-respect is to make the poor fellows clean. From that moment they begin to look on themselves as new men—with a new start, new hopes, new duties” (187). For Kingsley, this is a form of baptism that has physically, psychologically, and spiritually purifying effects.

Tom’s drowning symbolizes this process, suggesting that even “street Arabs” can and want to be redeemed. After he is found in Ellie’s room, the water calls to him as he flees across the countryside, looking “like a small black gorilla fleeing to the forest” (17). As he runs, Tom can “hear the water falling, trickling, tinkling ... How he longed to get down to it, and cool his poor baked lips” (22). Free of Grimes and the city, nature calls to him. As he gets closer to the

river and further from the site of his trauma, he can hear it ever more clearly. The river's song, which describes its journey from the city to the sea, further emphasizes the distinction between the city as a place of filth and the country as a site of cleanliness and purity. Its waters are "dank and foul" in "the smoky town," but as they move away from "wharf and sewer and slimy bank" to the "golden sands . . . / And the taintless tide," they become "undefiled, for the undefiled" (23). The river calls out to "mother and child," beckoning the "undefiled" to come "play" and "bathe" in its waters (23-24). Tom, lured by the prospect of becoming clean, makes his way through the beautiful British landscape toward the river and discovers the cottage where he initially stops (25, 23-30).

At the edge of death, Tom continues to confuse the water's call for church bells, a conflation that heavy-handedly signifies the water's baptismal power. His desire to go into church, even though he thinks "the people will never let him come in, all over soot and dirt like that," indicates his readiness for redemption. This is emphasized further by his repeated refrain, "I must be clean, I must be clean" (30). He decides then that he be "will be a fish" and "swim in the water" to cleanse himself, unaware all the while that nature—embodied by the Irish woman—is taking him there (31). Indeed, the extended scene is a parable for natural theology, suggesting those who listen to nature will find God and redemption in it.

The water is full of fairies who watch over Tom on his journey from blackened, savage ape-child to water-baby and finally into his final form as a Christian man of science. The water-fairies represent water's baptismal power, and, more generally, nature's benign agency over humankind and the spiritual element "underlying all of nature:" God's grace (Kingsley, qtd. in Conlin, *Evolution* 117). Thus, like soot, the water acts upon Tom's body, cleansing his body and soul to prepare him for metamorphosis. When Tom falls into the river, the fairies slough away

his blackened body and leave it behind, so when the search crew finds it later, all they can see is “a black thing in the water ... Tom’s body” and conclude he drowned. On the contrary, “Tom was quite alive, and cleaner, and merrier, than he ever had been.” Torn away from the pollutants among which he had lived his whole life and plunged into the clean, rushing water, nature begins to reclaim him. The narrator describes the process as if Tom had been released from bondage: “The fairies had washed him ... in the swift river, so thoroughly, that not only his dirt, but his whole husk had been washed quite off him, and the pretty little real Tom was washed out of the inside of it, and swam away ... We will hope Tom will be wiser, now that he has got safe out of his sooty old shell” (43).

In addition to the water-fairies who silently watch over Tom on his journey, Kingsley uses three maternal fairies to represent natural law and allegorize his understanding of nature’s economy: Mother Carey (who appears to Tom and Grimes as the old Irish woman), and the sisters Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid and Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby. While Naomi Wood argues that Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid specifically embodies natural law, all three fairies represent nature’s invisible workings; at times, they seem to blur together. The sisters especially appear to be two halves of a whole and illustrate the binary outcomes of living against (Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid) and with natural laws (Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby).

The sisters begin where the other “end[s]” and work in tandem (113). Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby nurtures and rewards those who follow nature’s laws, and Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid doles out punishment to those who disobey them. For example, when the Professor Ptthmlnsprts catches Tom in a net, yet fails “to believe in a water-baby when he saw it, she made him believe in worse things than water-babies—in unicorns, firedrakes, mantikoras, basilisks, [and so on]” (91). As a result, he goes insane before eventually learning his lesson and

growing to be a “sadder and wiser man” (98). She similarly punishes Tom for his misdeeds. At their first meeting, she explains her function, teaching he and the reader simultaneously that nature cannot help but punish those who disobey her. Although she is kind to the other water-babies and gives them candies, she places “a nasty cold hard pebble” into naughty Tom’s mouth (111). When he protests, she tells him: “I am the best friend you ever had in all your life. But I will tell you; I cannot help punishing people when they do wrong. ... For I work by machinery, just like an engine” (112). She further explains that until people obey nature she will be ugly. When there is no more sin in the world, she will grow beautiful like her sister. Until that day, she tells Tom, she must reprimand those who do not obey Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby (113). After this lecture, Tom watches as she doles out punishments to people who had unintentionally sinned against her (people who know what they did wrong, she sternly explains, “are in a very different place from this” [115-116]). She then leaves him with a promise and warning “to be a good boy” so that when Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby visits, she will notice Tom and “teach [him] how to behave” (116).

In the next moment, Kingsley complicates the novel’s message, suggesting that phylogeny and ontogeny depends not just on the forces within the environment, but also on people’s choices and behaviors. Now that Tom is free of the negative influences of the city and his blackened body, he must learn how to obey nature and leave behind his beastly inclinations. Immediately after Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid’s visit, he concentrates his energies on behaving well so he can meet Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby. When he does, she showers him with affection and sweets. However, he soon grows comfortable in the pleasant environment, forgets Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid’s warning, and can think only of how to get into Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby’s candy cabinets. Invoking the struggle for existence, the narrator

explains: “Being quite comfortable is a very good thing, but it does not make people good. Indeed, it sometimes makes them naughty” (120-121). When Tom sneaks into the cabinet, Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid immediately appears, silently watching as he gobbles up the candies that he cannot stop eating even though they make him sick (121). She does not appear to immediately punish him; instead, when Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby reappears several weeks later, she will not cuddle Tom. He has become too “horny and prickly” (124). In a moment reminiscent of when he first recognizes himself in Ellie’s mirror, Tom realizes he is covered with “prickles, just like a sea-egg” (124).

Unlike before, when his degenerate condition was caused by circumstances beyond his control, Tom’s grotesque transformation is caused entirely by his actions. It is a punishment. The narrator reassures the reader that the change is natural, introducing the lesson that behavior determines evolution: it “was quite natural; for you must know and believe that people’s souls make their bodies ... therefore, when Tom’s soul grew all prickly with naughty tempers, his body could not help growing prickly too” (124). Like before, Tom is deeply ashamed of his form. He consequently begs for Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid’s forgiveness. She gives it, but tells him only he can remove his nasty prickles (124). At this moment, Ellie, who had also drowned and become a water-baby, appears and takes on the role of Tom’s educator or a sanitary reformer. Over some weeks, she teaches him how to behave, effectively domesticating him like a feral animal. As he learns to be obedient, his prickles disappear and “his skin [becomes] smooth and clean again” (125).

*The Water-Babies* returns repeatedly to the idea that ontogeny and phylogeny are determined by a cycle of behavior and environment, thus allegorizing Kingsley’s theory of progressive and punitive evolution so the reader may learn the lesson like Tom. Earlier in the

narrative, Tom meets a mated pair of salmon (“the king of all the fish” [68]), who complain to Tom about the trout. The episode is a clear parable for degeneration. When Tom asks why they “dislike the trout,” the male replies:

“My dear, we do not even mention them, if we can help it; for I am sorry to say they are relations of ours who do us no credit. A great many years ago they were just like us: but they were so lazy, and cowardly, and greedy, that instead of going down to the sea every year to see the world and grow strong and fat, they chose to stay and poke about in the little streams and eat words and grubs: and they are very properly punished for it; for they have grown ugly and brown and spotting and small; and are actually so degraded in their tastes, that they will eat our children.” (7)

Here, Kingsley describes the fish in racialized terms, effectively positioning them as the degraded, inferior other to the noble salmon who have been punished for living against nature. They could be interpreted as a foreign racialized other, but the text suggests they more accurately represent the degenerate English whose class difference has hardened into biological difference. “[N]o enemies,” the narrator explains, “are so bitter against each other as those who are of the same race; and a salmon looks on a trout, as some great folks look on some little folks, as something just too much like himself to be tolerated” (71).

Even more than the trout, the story of the Doasyoulikes serves as a cautionary tale of what Kingsley thought happens when people simply “do as they like” and not what God and nature demand. Ellie and Tom learn about their history in Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid’s book, which depicts their evolutionary downfall like a play. The parable is strikingly reminiscent of the degenerative evolution Kingsley describes in “The Fall.” On the first page, they see that the



original Doasyoulikes—like the trout—are lazy and do not want to work. After they leave “the country of Hardwork,” they gradually lose their resourcefulness and drive to do anything at all. They consequently succumb to worsening environmental conditions. Like Tom before he stole from Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby’s sweets cabinet, they become far too comfortable, eventually losing the ability to strive for improvement or compete in the struggle for existence completely.

Kingsley emphasizes the Doasyoulikes’ detrimental relationship to their environment, implying that those who live in improper places and fail to improve nature through agriculture and industry will cease to be human and degenerate into stupid beasts. The Doasyoulikes choose to live in an inhospitable place below a volcano, ignoring the smoke, ashes, and cinders Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid sent as warning signs (132). After it erupts and exterminates two-thirds of the population, the remaining Doasyoulikes stay put instead of moving to a safer place. They rationalize their decision by telling themselves that since the volcano “has blown up once,” it will not erupt again. However, because they have forgotten their ancestors’ agricultural knowledge, they “live very hard,” subsisting “on nuts and roots which they scratched out of the ground with sticks.” As the water-babies flip through the pages of evolutionary time, each one moving them forward five hundred years, Tom notices that the Doasyoulikes are “growing no better than savages.” Ellie remarks on “how ugly they are all getting.” Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid explains to the children that this is a consequence of their poor diet. Her comment also invokes the larger point about obeying nature and equates the Irish with the Doasyoulikes, suggesting to the reader that they are a similarly degraded race who are unable to utilize nature: “When people live on poor vegetables instead of roast beef and plum pudding, their jaws grow large and their lips grow coarse, like the poor Paddies who eat potatoes” (133).

The book shows Tom and Ellie the Doasyoulikes falling into a downward evolutionary spiral where they create ever-worsening environmental conditions and habits that only lead to further physical and intellectual degeneration. As they adapt to the changing conditions around them (instead of moving or changing those conditions), the Doasyoulikes become savages first, then beasts “fearfully like” apes, and eventually go extinct (133). The children observe this somberly, as they now realize the high evolutionary stakes of disobeying nature’s precepts. “But could you not have saved them?” Ellie asks Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid. She responds: “At first, my dear; if only they would have behaved like men, and set to work to do what they did not like. But the longer they waited, and behaved like dumb beasts, who only do what they like, the stupider and clumsier they grew; till at last they were past all cure, for they had thrown their own wits away” (135). She continues, explaining her (nature’s) role in human evolution:

Folks say now that I can make beasts into men, by circumstance, and selection, and competition, and so forth. Well, perhaps they are right; and perhaps again, they are wrong. . . . Whatever their ancestors are, men they are; and I advise them to behave as such, and act accordingly. . . . there are two sides to every question, and a downhill as well as an uphill road; and, if I can turn beasts into men, I can, by the same laws of circumstance, and selection, and competition, turn men into beasts. (136)

The parable of the Doasyoulikes thus translates Kingsley’s theory of progressive and punitive evolution for the child reader, promoting racism, for one, but also the laws by which he thought the English could avoid degeneration. Just as Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid warns Tom that he would have become “a beast” if he had not learned to be obedient to her, the Doasyoulikes’ story

compels the reader to learn the same lesson so he or she may also grow up to become fit English citizens (136).

Although the novel ultimately culminates in Tom's successful metamorphosis, it also shows that his tainted childhood has already affected evolutionary process. This reflects the concern Kingsley voices elsewhere about the spread of racial degradation beyond England's impoverished citizens. As Tom struggles to find his way to the water before his transformation, the narrator emphasizes the filth he leaves behind: "of course, he dirtied everything terribly as he went. There has been a great black smudge all down the crag ever since." There are also "more black beetles than ever before" because "Tom ... blacked the original papa of them all, just as he was setting off to be married" (27). The minor scene illustrates the dangers of degenerate reproduction, suggesting one person's degeneracy may spread and become the norm. It also comments on the long-term biological dangers of the unclean, industrial city. Occurring just before Tom's death, the aside points to the disastrous consequences of letting English children become "human soot." While Tom is just one wasted life, he represents many more who will determine the quality of England's future generations. Consequently, like the others discussed here, the scene constitutes a warning about the consequences of degeneration.

Placed beside Kingsley's sermons, lectures, and essays, it becomes clear that *The Water-Babies* constitutes a fictional intervention into the degeneracy crisis he and other mid-century Victorians feared was mounting in industrial England. For its child reader, the novel outlines the way in which he—the narrator addresses his reader as a male—can become a "true English man" (190). To its middle- and upper-class adult audiences, the novel offers them a program for how to raise fit children. Beyond that, however, it calls for proto-environmentalist reform by beseeching its audience to address the plight of England's "human soot," the children Tom

represents, so they can quell the spread of urban degeneration. Tom's story makes clear that such children are made degenerate by the industrial city (not born that way), and how to save them: by removing them from the unnatural city and plunging them into a wholesome, healthy, nature-filled environment where their bodies can heal and they can learn to follow God and nature's laws. Kingsley's fairy tale consequently compels the reader to think about the influence the environment has on ontogeny and phylogeny, as would similar narratives of degeneration and development in the subsequent years of the long nineteenth century.

## Chapter Three

### The Princess and the Goblin, The Time Machine, and the Dehumanizing Underground

George MacDonald's best-known fairy tale, *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), and the first of H.G. Wells' scientific romances, *The Time Machine* (1895), both feature subterranean species that originated from working-class people who moved below ground and consequently became inhuman after generations of evolutionary deterioration. In appearance, MacDonald's goblins and Wells' Morlocks are both uncanny and monstrous: they are bestial, but they also bear strong traces of their human ancestors. Their behavior is equally monstrous: both species attempt or commit horrific atrocities against those who live above them. MacDonald's goblins—which are far closer to human than the Morlocks—wage war on their human neighbors through direct violence and miscegenetic interbreeding. Among other things, they entertain fantasies of total genocide, attempt to drown the local miners, and try to abduct the princess Irene so they can torture and wed her to the goblin prince, Harelip. In *The Time Machine*, the Morlocks attack the Time Traveler and habitually cannibalize the Eloi, the effete descendants of the Victorian bourgeois who live above their predators like “fatted cattle” (Wells, *Time Machine* 50).

Despite the similarities between the goblins and Morlocks, no studies have examined *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Time Machine* beside one another as artifacts of Victorian degenerationism.<sup>34</sup> Together, though, these novels<sup>35</sup> illuminate the Victorians' sense that unnatural environments were causing the lower classes to degenerate *en masse* and thus

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<sup>34</sup> In fact, only a few old studies examine the novels in relation to one another. Jules Zanger discusses them in an essay on the Industrial Revolution and Victorian fantasy, and Wendy Lesser compares them very briefly in her book on literature and the underground.

<sup>35</sup> Technically, *The Time Machine* is a novella, but in this chapter I use “novels” to reference both works.

transforming them into a menacing and brutish biological other. In both, the text indicates that the underground produced its posthuman inhabitants by slowly—over generations and generations—deforming their working-class ancestors. In this chapter, I show that these formative, dehumanizing undergrounds evoke the deleterious environments many Victorians believed were to blame for the degeneration of Britain’s working- and underclass citizens. Consequently, like the *Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby*, these novels suggest that degeneration is an environmental problem and thus requires environmental solutions.

### **The Victorian Underground**

MacDonald and Wells’ respective decisions to make their degenerate, posthuman species subterranean reflect the underground’s material and symbolic significance during the Victorian era. Among others, Wendy Lesser and Rosalind Williams show that during the nineteenth century the British landscape came to be dominated by places that *were* underground or which observers persistently *described* as such because of their resemblance to hell.<sup>36</sup> Actual and metaphorical subterranean space thus became a defining feature of the nation’s new industrial and urban topography. Furthermore, since poor citizens had the most contact with these places, many Victorians considered the underground the realm of the “residuum” and the source of the degeneration they believed was creating a biological gulf between the lower and upper classes.

Although mines, catacombs, and other manmade subterranean spaces existed before the Industrial Revolution, they were few and far between. Consequently, Haewon Hwang points out, the underground was primarily an imagined space alternatively associated with hell, rebirth, and shelter (1). Relatively few people visited it. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, scientific,

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<sup>36</sup> Most notably, Haewon Hwang and David L. Pike’s work reveals this as well.

industrial, and urban development projects opened the world before ground like never before and thus transformed it into a “concrete place” (Hwang 1). With the construction of projects like the Thames Tunnel or the first subway (which opened in 1843 and 1863 respectively), the underground had become a key facet of the modern cityscape well before MacDonald and Wells were writing.

The expansion of subterranean space was not limited to the city, however. To keep up with the insatiable demand for coal, the mining industry grew rapidly from the onset of the Industrial Revolution (Benson 6; Thesing xi; Williams 55). The number and size of collieries increased, as did the number of children, women, and men working in them (Benson 6, 11). To offer a sense of the industry’s growth, miners brought to surface ten million tons of coal in 1800; eighty years later, they produced one hundred fifty million tons. Relatedly, few collieries had more than fifty miners before 1840. At the end of the century, over three hundred miners could work in a single pit (Benson 6).

The Victorians’ reaction to the new underground was complex. Some people hailed the mines, arcades, and other structures that made it up as testaments to progress and humanity’s triumph over nature. Others regarded these subterranean places with trepidation and ambivalence. To many Victorians, the modern, engineered underground signified the loss of the natural world and social upheaval, even decay and depravity, that industrialization had brought forth (Williams 53-54).

Although middle- and upper-class visitors initially flocked to see engineering marvels like the Thames Tunnel, the Victorian underground was predominantly the realm of the working

class and the destitute.<sup>37</sup> In his work, David L. Pike details how the Victorian city was segregated along vertical lines, but this was true of the countryside as well. People in the lowest socioeconomic brackets were far more likely to live, work, or travel underground than anyone else. They were the people who excavated to build railway tunnels and sewers; they mined for coal and other natural resources; they scavenged sewers; they lived in cellar dwellings; they used the Thames Tunnel (Lesser 83; Pike, “Greatest” 341; *Subterranean* 7). Consequently, many middle- and upper-class Victorians came to fear the underground, viewing it as a hotbed of crime, disease, and immorality (Lesser 77-84; Pike, “Greatest” 351, 356; *Subterranean* 5, 7).

The metaphorical underground also belonged to the working classes. Horrified by their conditions, the Victorians routinely described factories, poor neighborhoods like London’s East End, and even entire industrial regions such as England’s “Black Country” in the West Midlands as if they were subterranean, or hell come to earth (Lesser 78, 85; Pike, *Subterranean* 2; Williams 68-69). As Rosalind Williams notes, to observers “whole industrial districts seemed to resemble eruptions from the underground, to be regions where nature had disappeared,” or—more accurately—been eradicated in the name of industry and progress (68). The same could be said of journalists, physicians, and other commentators’ reactions to working-class neighborhoods, especially London’s East End, which they fixated on as the epicenter of degeneracy (McLaughlin 79-80, 133; Stedman Jones 12).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> In ““The Greatest Wonder of the World’: Brunel’s Tunnel and the Meanings of Underground London,” David L. Pike traces the pedestrian tunnel’s history as a “tourist spectacle” for members of the upper classes and “practical thoroughfare” for the working class (341, 343).

<sup>38</sup> Focused on depictions of East London as an “urban jungle,” Joseph McLaughlin’s study *Writing the Urban Jungle: Reading Empire in London from Doyle to Eliot* (2000) testifies to this point.



These two undergrounds combined to create a prevailing sense that the lower classes were festering in a degenerative abyss, cut off from the natural environment that made the British great. At the same time, technological advancement and the construction of subterranean places like the Thames Tunnel made it seem possible, and even probable, that people could one day live permanently below ground (Hwang 12; Williams 11). This possibility, Williams demonstrates, inspired a new kind of speculative and fantastic fiction that depicted underground civilizations (10-11). *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Time Machine* fall into this category, but unlike other fiction about life underground that is unconcerned with class (such as Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* [1871]), these novels are wholly preoccupied with the social and evolutionary consequences of segregating the poor in the netherworld. Their subterranean settings, I contend, symbolize the environment many Victorians thought were causing the poor to degenerate, and their horrific posthuman characters suggest that the process was transforming them into vengeful monsters.

### **Made Goblin: MacDonald's Allegory of Environmentally-Driven Degeneration**

George MacDonald's second novel for children, *The Princess and the Goblin*, is, in part, a Christian allegory about the power of faith.<sup>39</sup> In it, an omniscient narrator relates a tale with two protagonists: Irene, a princess who is "about eight years old" at the story's start, and Curdie, a good-natured miner "about twelve years old" (47, 70). Because Irene's mother is weak and unable to care for her, the king has her live with wholesome "country people in a large house ... on the side of [a] mountain" in the range where Curdie, his father Peter, and the other men of the community mine (47). Infuriated by the miners' encroachment on their territory, the goblins that

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<sup>39</sup> *The Princess and the Goblin* appeared serially in the children's magazine *Good Words for the Young* (which he edited) from November 1870 to June 1871, and as a volume in 1872.

live beneath the mountains plot to kidnap Irene, force her to marry their prince, and flood the mines to kill the miners and prevent others from working there in the future. Irene ultimately saves herself with Curdie's help and the spiritual guidance of her great-great-grandmother, a fairy godmother who teaches both children to have faith. Curdie, who learns of the goblins' plans after surveilling them for months, thwarts their efforts to inundate the mines by enlisting the other miners to redirect the water into the goblins' lairs. Consequently, all but a few goblins drown; no miners die.

Although many critics read the goblins as mere symbols of evil, that interpretation divorces the fairy tale from its historical context.<sup>40</sup> It is useful to remember that monsters, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen theorizes, are cultural “construct[s] and projection[s].” They embody and therefore reveal the fears and desires of the cultures which produced them (4). They “are never created *ex nihilo*, but through a process of fragmentation and recombination in which elements are extracted from ‘various forms’ (including—indeed, especially—marginalized social groups) and then assembled as the monster” (Girard, qtd. in Cohen 11).<sup>41</sup> In other words, monsters are bricolage, and MacDonald's goblins are no exception.

MacDonald's clearest source of inspiration are the preternatural goblins, gnomes, and dwarves of British and Northern European folklore. Citing his goblins as one example, Carole Silver shows that the Victorians fused these malicious subterranean fairies and furthermore conflated them with real dwarfs, who were consequently equated with evil and sexual perversion (117, 120-122, 127). Although actual dwarfs had long been considered grotesque “freaks of

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<sup>40</sup> For two more recent examples of this interpretation, see Thomas L. Martin, “God and Laughter: Overcoming the Darkness in Modern Fantasy Literature” (2015), and Colin Manlove, “*The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie*.”

<sup>41</sup> Here, Cohen draws on René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (trans. Yvonne Freccero, 1986).

nature,” during the Victorian period racial anthropologists and folklorists drew on evolutionary theories to link “dwarfs of all kinds to primordial humans, to primitive non-Caucasian races, and to the apes” (119, 128). As a result, dwarfs came to be seen “as a separate race,” the remaining vestiges of a prehistoric, beastly people who were not quite human and which threatened to pollute the British’s racial line (119).

However, *The Princess and the Goblin* speaks less to the Victorians’ interest in living relics of primordial humans than it does their fear that environmentally-driven degeneration was transforming the working class into a vindictive, immoral, and biologically divergent other. MacDonald’s goblins are not the remaining survivors of an ancient humanoid race; rather, they are a monstrous offshoot of people who he describes as “fair” (49), “white” (52), and “nice-looking” (70). Like his friends F.D. Maurice, Charles Kingsley, and Octavia Hill, MacDonald worried about the condition of the working class and the effects of their domestic environment (Hein 205-207, McCulloch 57).<sup>42</sup> Rolland Hein points out that MacDonald’s earlier novel *Robert Falconer* (1868) voices these concerns (206), but *The Princess and the Goblin* does too. As I will show, the goblins and their subterranean habitat symbolize the degenerate working class and the wretched conditions that many Victorians thought made them such. Consequently, I argue, the novel is a political allegory about the danger of allowing the industrial working class to fester in degrading, inhuman environments as much as it is one about the importance of Christian faith.

The origin story of the goblins—who are also called gnomes, kobolds, and cobs—establishes their symbolic significance by marking them as posthuman degenerates that evolved

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<sup>42</sup> MacDonald, Hein notes, visited Hill’s housing projects to evangelize her tenants (205-206). Robert McGillis and Kathy Triggs also touch on MacDonald’s views on poverty and his philanthropism (McGillis 6, 17-18; Triggs 31-38).

from subjugated people who isolated themselves underground and were subsequently transformed, over many generations, by the unnatural environment. In the first chapter, the narrator explains that the mountains where Irene lived contain deep mines, which the local men worked, and a vast network of “huge caverns ... and winding ways” which miners had discovered during excavation. These caverns, he tells the reader, housed “a strange race of beings” (48). He then begins to relate the “legend” of the goblins’ evolution. The first few lines indicate that their ancestors were, or at least believed themselves to be, politically and economically oppressed people. They consequently call to mind Britain’s aggrieved working classes, whose poverty compelled them to live in neighborhoods and homes that reformers argued were causing hereditary degeneration. They follow:

There was a legend current in the country, that at one time they lived above ground, and were very like other people. But for some reason or other, concerning which they were different legendary theories, the king had laid what they thought too severe taxes upon them, or had required observances of them they did not like, or had begun to treat them with more severity, in some way or other, and impose stricter laws; and the consequence was that they had all disappeared from the face of the country. According to the legend, however, instead of going to some other country, they had all taken refuge in the subterranean caverns, whence they never came out but at night. (48)

While here it appears that the goblins’ ancestors left by their own accord, the text is ambivalent. Later, it indicates that the king had expelled them (49). This may reflect the sanitary reformers’ own ambivalence about whether the poor were forced to live in slums or they chose to do so

(Allen 124-125).<sup>43</sup> Regardless, the passage suggests quite clearly that class conflict spurred the goblins' ancestors to flee below ground and thus begin deteriorating.

The goblins' subterranean habitat symbolizes the degenerative environment that sanitary reformers like Kingsley condemned for degrading the health and character of the poor and thus "propagating a race deteriorated physically and morally" (Hole 98).<sup>44</sup> In the novel, the underground appears as a corrupting, dehumanizing force that transformed its human occupants into goblins whose bodies and morals are equally "mis-shapen" (which I discuss below) (48). For example, after recounting the reasons for their relocation below ground, the narrator explains that the troglodytes "had greatly altered in the course of generations; and no wonder, seeing they lived away from the sun, in cold and wet and dark places" (48). The language here suggests the abysmal habitat prompted its inhabitants' transmutation and implies that degeneration is inevitable in an inhospitable and unnatural environment. It also importantly alludes to the notorious conditions of working-class homes, many of which were below ground in cellars or so poorly lit they may as well have been (Hayward 5; Hole 49; Lamb 40; Wohl 296). Throughout the era of degenerationism, reformers sounded the alarm about the "dark" and "damp" housing

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<sup>43</sup> For example, in *The Homes of the Working Classes with Suggestions for their Improvement* (1866), James Hole argues that the poor contribute to the sanitation crisis by choosing to live in squalid, overcrowded dwellings (5, 43-44).

<sup>44</sup> I discuss Kingsley's conviction that the physical environment determined the health and morals of the working class in the previous chapter. Additionally, Allen, Lamb, Stedman-Jones, Thorsheim, and Wohl each discuss this topic extensively.

that dominated urban and rural areas alike and which they believed was molding its occupants into a bestial race.<sup>45</sup>

As Anthony Wohl points out, affluent Victorians saw the inhabitants of such dwellings as “a sub-species of cave-dwellers,” “low-life[s]” who were animalized and barely human (296). Like Tom when he sees his apish reflection in *The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby*, MacDonald’s goblins echo this sentiment. Although they “were not so far removed from the human” (49) that they had lost all semblance to their ancestors, the goblins are subhuman and, furthermore, closely resemble their “household animals” (109). In chapter thirteen, “The Cobs’ Creatures,” the narrator explains that the goblins’ ancestors had taken domestic and wild creatures with them “into the lower regions of darkness” (109). Since the “conditions of subterranean life [were] equally unnatural for both” (110), they became similarly monstrous. The animals gained a “grotesque resemblance to the human” (109) while their “owners had sunk towards them” (110). Although the chapter is ostensibly about the goblins’ creatures, it highlights their own degraded, bestial nature and reinforces the novel’s theme that unnatural environmental conditions cause degeneration, which, for humans, drags them toward the animal.

MacDonald’s descriptions of the goblins as “mis-shapen,” “dwarfish,” and “degraded” (49, 90) further liken them to working-class degenerates, whose bodily “deformities” and “defects” (Morgan 5, 6) the Victorians fixated on as evidence of pervasive and progressive decay

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<sup>45</sup> The adjectives “damp” and “dark” appear over and over to describe deleterious working-class homes in sanitary reform literature from around the publication of *The Princess and the Goblin*, including Hole’s *The Homes of the Working Classes with Suggestions for their Improvement* (1866), Octavia Hill’s *Homes of the London Poor* (1875), and Burn’s *Sanitary Science as Applied to the Healthy Construction of Houses in Town and Country* (1872). These texts also consistently argue that dry, sunlit homes promote moral and physical health.

(Arata 19-22; Greenslade 16; Rose 57-59). For example, in *The Danger of Deterioration of Race from the Too Rapid Increase of Great Cities* (1866), John Edward Morgan cites “deplorably frequent” instances of “deformity, accompanied by actual distortions” and “minor physical defects” as symptoms of degeneration (5-6). Similarly, in *Our Coal and Our Coal-Pits: The People in Them, and the Scenes Around Them* (1853),<sup>46</sup> John Leifchild describes miners in language that mirrors MacDonald’s descriptions of the goblins and recalls Lamarckian evolution. Pitmen, he explains, exhibit “physical degeneration” (197). They are, among other things, “diminutive” and “misshapen” (197). Furthermore, he argues that since miners have passed their acquired “defects” down over “a long series of generations” they should be considered “a distinct race of beings” (197). Recall that MacDonald similarly introduces the goblins as “a strange race of beings,” thus alluding to the sense that victims of degeneration were a race apart (48).

It is not just the goblins’ bodies that mark them as strange, inhuman, and degenerate. The novel indicates that the underground also altered their minds and, subsequently, their behavior, which reflects the notion that environmentally-driven degeneration degraded its victims’ minds and morals as much as their bodies. The first chapter indicates that the goblins were more intelligent than their ancestors, but they were also “cunning,” mischievous, and vengeful (48-49). The goblins furthermore held an “ancestral grudge” against the humans who lived above them (49). Consequently, they had devoted themselves to terrorizing their neighbors through, among other things, sexual violence.

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<sup>46</sup> Leifchild’s study was initially published in 1853, but it was reprinted multiple times throughout the Victorian era. Like Kingsley’s writing during the 1840s and 50s, it furthermore reveals degenerationism’s roots in the early Victorian period.

The goblins' "plans ... to take thorough revenge upon" the humans speak to middle- and upper-class Victorians' apocalyptic fears that (1) degeneration was transforming the working class into a criminal, sexually immoral, and vengeful race that would rise against them and (2) that *metissage* would help spread degeneracy beyond the so-called residuum and destroy the British race (MacDuffie 226; McClintock 47-48, 119; Stedman Jones 259). At the time of the story's events, Curdie discovers that the goblins intend to tunnel up from beneath Irene's home, kidnap her, and force her to marry their prince, Harelip (164). Of course, the implication is that he will rape her and she will bear a goblin. The text indicates this had happened at least once before: the goblin king's first wife "came from up stairs [sic]" and died giving birth to Harelip (80). Harelip—himself the product of rape—represents the bestial and perverse degenerate who preys upon respectable women. In a conversation with his father, he fantasizes about the pleasure he will feel while torturing her: "it *will* be nice to make her cry. I'll have the skin taken off between her toes, and tie them up till they grow together" until they resemble everyone else's (the goblins have no or few toes) (129; original emphasis). It is consequently clear that the threat to Irene is immediate, but the novel also suggests Harelip and her coupling would have violent evolutionary repercussions as well, since it would result in more goblins, not more humans—especially in the environment that dehumanized the goblins' ancestors.

The goblins also plot to destroy the mines where Curdie, his father, and the other men work because they are encroaching on the goblins' territory and forcing them to excavate deeper and deeper into the mountains. After observing their meetings, Curdie realizes that they intend "to inundate the mine by breaking outlets for the water accumulated in the natural reservoirs of the mountain," which would demolish the mine "in an hour" and kill anyone inside (92). The text implies, however, that the goblins would not be satisfied by this violence alone; eventually, their



instinctual hatred would drive them to kill all the humans. In a telling scene, the queen muses about this possibility:

There is something about those sun-people that is *very* troublesome. I cannot imagine how it is that ... we permit them to exist at all. Why do we not destroy them entirely and use their cattle and grazing lands at our pleasure? Of course we do not want to live in their horrid country! It is far too glaring for our quieter and more refined tastes. But we might use it as a sort of outhouse, you know. Even our creatures' eyes might get used to it, and if they did grow blind that would be of no consequence, provided they grew fat as well. But we might even keep their great cows and other creatures, and then we should have a few more luxuries, such as cream and cheese. (137-138)

The king declares that it is an idea "worth thinking of" and marvels at the queen's "genius for conquest," but Curdie interrupts them before he can contemplate the possibility further (142). This genocidal fantasy articulates affluent Victorians' fear that the degenerate residuum would revolt against them, the physically and morally fit. Indeed, it suggests that the victims of environmentally-driven degeneration may *replace* the racially pure.

The possibility that the goblins will destroy the humans persists until Curdie facilitates their destruction, thus eradicating the threat of degeneration and human erasure. After learning of the goblins' plan to flood the mine, he directs the miners to erect blockades that would turn the water back into their lair (179). When the goblins let the water loose after they fail to kidnap Irene, it floods their caverns, drowning nearly all of them: "For days and days the water continued to rush ... and a few goblin bodies were swept out into the road." Later, after the water

receded, “they found a multitude of dead goblins,” including the savage queen, in the tunnels they had dug below the castle (190).

With most of the goblins dead, at its conclusion the novel swiftly turns from a narrative of degeneration into one of regeneration and redemption. The narrator explains that some of the goblins and their creatures survived the flood by running out from below ground and escaping “upon the mountain” (190). Of these, many fled the region, but some stayed. Over time, they “grew milder in character, and indeed became very much like the Scotch Brownies. Their skulls became softer as well as their hearts, and their feet grew harder, and by degrees they became friendly with the inhabitants of the mountain and even with the miners” (191). While it is not clear if the goblins evolved back into humans (are they benevolent goblins like the brownies? Are they humans who are like them? Something else entirely?), the passage does indicate that moving aboveground redeemed their bodies and minds.

*The Princess and the Goblin* thus reiterates the argument of sanitary reformers, such as Kingsley, who insisted that deleterious environmental conditions were causing working-class citizens to degenerate and, therefore, that immersing them in a sanitary, nature-filled environment would save them. Like *The Water-Babies*, consequently, the novel deploys the fairy tale form to highlight the problem of working-class degeneracy and show that its solution lay in environmental reform. Ultimately, it suggests that the infernal conditions the poor lived in were transforming them into vengeful monsters that threatened to pollute or even destroy the British race—as would *The Time Machine* at the end of the century.

## Made Morlock: *The Time Machine* and the Environment of the Poor

Unlike *The Princess and the Goblin*, which no study of literature and degeneration has examined, *The Time Machine* is famous for exploring the implications of what Wells called “degradation” (“Zoological Retrogression” 246). Many critics discuss its treatment of the subject, including Pick in *Faces of Degeneration* and Hurley in *The Gothic Body*, but few consider the novella through an ecocritical lens.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, as I pointed out earlier in this chapter, no one has considered *The Time Machine* and *The Princess and the Goblin* together as literary responses to degeneration theory and fodder for the Victorians’ fear of racial and evolutionary decline. Reading them beside one another, though, shows that the Victorians perceived the poor were festering in a degenerative abyss and brings Wells’ ecological commentary into stark relief. Like *The Princess and the Goblin* (and, for that matter, *The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby*), *The Time Machine* depicts the degeneration of the poor as an environmental problem and thus illustrates the need for apposite solutions.

While Kingsley and MacDonald’s careers aligned with the rise of degenerationism, Wells (who was born in 1866) came of age and began his literary career during its zenith. To recall, the fervor over degeneration peaked between 1880 and 1914 before it gradually faded away during World War I and II. Over the last two decades of the nineteenth century, eugenicist and social Darwinist ideas gained increasing credence. Many Victorians thought “the ‘wrong kind’ of people were breeding like rabbits” and called for eugenicist measures (Fayter 262). However, others argued the deleterious environment was at the root of the degeneracy crisis and

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<sup>47</sup> Two who do are Jan Holmm and Alan MacDuffie. In “*The Time Machine* and the Ecotopian Tradition” (1999), Holmm argues that *The Time Machine* critiques ecotopian fantasies. MacDuffie analyzes the novel in relation to contemporary discourses about energy and urban degeneration in *Victorian Literature, Energy, and the Ecological Imagination* (2014).

consequently advocated for an entirely different approach to the problem (Arata 17; Luckin 237-239; Rose 82; Thorsheim 69). They insisted “only a radical transformation in explicitly *environmental* conditions could save the hungry and ill-housed from progressive mental and biological decline” (Luckin 239). As the previous two chapters discuss, throughout the degenerationist era this belief motivated reform efforts that we now recognize as the beginnings of modern environmental activism in Great Britain.

It is well known that Wells was fascinated with evolutionary degeneration: much of his early writing, fiction and scientific journalism alike, addresses the concept and its implications for humanity. In “Zoological Retrogression” (1891), he disputes the notion that evolution is always progressive and contends that changing conditions of existence will likely cause humans to degenerate and disappear, supplanted by a “Coming Beast” fit for the new conditions (253). “There is,” he warns, “no guarantee in scientific knowledge of man’s permanence or permanent ascendancy. He has a remarkably variable organisation, and his own activities and increase cause the conditions of his existence to fluctuate far more widely than those of any animal have ever done” (253). In other words, humans may unintentionally create social *and* material conditions that lead to human degradation and extinction.

In *The Time Machine*, Wells implies the Victorians already have. The speculative novella envisions a future where two human-made environments—one hyper-pastoral and one hyper-urban—and their attendant lifestyles have caused *homo sapiens* to split along class and geographical divisions into “two distinct animals” (38). The descendants of the upper classes, the Eloi, reside above ground. The descendants of the lower classes, the Morlocks, live below the Eloi and emerge at night to prey on them. The two species consequently illustrate the premise, as

Wells put it in an earlier version of the story, that “Man ... has been moulded, and will be, by the necessities of his environment” (*National Observer* 106).

Notably, while the Time Traveller calls the Eloi “creatures” (*Time Machine* 20, 35), he also calls them “people” (23), and repeatedly praises their frail beauty. Describing his first encounter with an Eloi, for example, he remarks, “He struck me as being a very beautiful and graceful creature ... His flushed face reminded me of the more beautiful kind of consumptive—that hectic beauty of which we used to hear so much” (20). Although they are unintelligent and childish, they are harmless, and the Time Traveller likes them—they are not *homo sapiens*, but he recognizes their humanity (even more so after he befriends one of the females, Weena). He never compares them to nonhuman species.

Conversely, the Morlocks resemble the goblins: they are malicious, cunning, and grotesque. The Time Traveller expresses horror at their “inhuman” appearance and declares “it was impossible ... to feel any humanity in the things” (45, 54). Indeed, when he recounts the moment he first glimpsed a Morlock scrambling down a well to the underworld, he calls him a “bleached, obscene, nocturnal Thing” (38). He also repeatedly likens them to animals; they are, for example, “ape-like” (37, 38), “ant-like” (50), “human spider[s]” (38), “Lemur[s]” (39), and “human rats” (59).

The differences between these imagined species manifest the class prejudice at the core of degenerationism. The Eloi may be weak and helpless, but they are not monstrous. Just like MacDonald’s goblins, however, the Morlocks reflect the Victorians’ perception that the degenerate working class was savage, bestial, and—above all—subhuman. Far more directly than the allegorical *Princess and the Goblin*, though, *The Time Machine* indicts privileged

Victorians for pushing the poor “out of the ease and the sunshine” and into the conditions that made them monstrous (47).

The novella recapitulates Wells’ argument in “Zoological Retrogression” that humans may create social and environmental conditions that lead to their devolution and eventual extinction. The Morlocks and Eloi alike are the result of their ancestors’ “reaction ... [to] altered conditions” and thus reflect the demands of their environments (or lack thereof) (28). The Eloi’s above ground world is eerily idyllic, a great garden full of fruit-bearing plants and the ruins of “palace-like buildings” (*Time Machine* 25). Aside from the Morlocks (who keep them as livestock, remember), the Eloi have no cares. They spend their days “in playing gently, in bathing in the river, in making love in a half-playful fashion, in eating fruit and sleeping” (35). After reflecting on their habitat, appearance, and behavior, the Time Traveller decides that their upper-class ancestors’ “too-perfect security ... had led them to a slow movement of degeneration, to a general dwindling in size, strength, and intelligence” (41). The Eloi thus embody Edwin Ray Lankester’s warning in *Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism* (1880) that the absence of struggle causes species to degenerate. He writes: “Any new set of conditions occurring to an animal which render its food and safety very easily attained seems to lead as a rule to Degeneration; just as an active healthy man sometimes degenerates when he becomes suddenly possessed of a fortune” (33).<sup>48</sup>

More importantly for the argument of this chapter, Wells uses the Morlocks to lay bare the evolutionary consequences of isolating the poor in the “artificial conditions” of the metaphorical and actual underworld (40). When he describes the moment that he discovered

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<sup>48</sup> The Eloi’s too-docile conditions of existence deserve further examination, but that is outside of this chapter’s focus.

humanity had split into one subterranean and one surface-level species, the Time Traveller explains he realized, “proceeding from the problems of our own age,” that the bourgeois had eventually pushed the proletariat completely below ground into an “artificial Underworld” that forced them to adapt to its conditions (40). He then defends his position. The passage effectively points out that economic and environmental inequality already separated the “Have-nots” from nature, segregating them in places that were symbolically or physically underground, while the “Haves” fled to greener locales. He declares:

No doubt it will seem grotesque enough to you—and wildly incredible!—and yet even now there are existing circumstances to point that way. There is a tendency to utilize underground space for the less ornamental purposes of civilization; there is the Metropolitan Railway in London, for instance, there are new electric railways, there are subways, there are underground workrooms and restaurants, and they increase and multiply. Evidently, I thought, this tendency had increased till Industry had gradually lost its birthright in the sky. I mean that it had gone deeper and deeper into larger and ever larger underground factories, spending a still-increasing amount of its time therein, till, in the end—! Even now, does not an East-end worker live in such artificial conditions as practically to be cut from the natural surface of the earth?

‘Again, the exclusive tendency of richer people—due, no doubt, to the increasing refinement of their education, and the widening gulf between them and the rude violence of the poor—is already leading to the closing, in their interest, of considerable portions of the surface of the land. About London, for instance, perhaps half the prettier country is shut in against intrusion. (40)

The Time Traveller's argument here chimes with and thus calls to mind those of Victorians who believed the environment was to blame for working-class degeneracy. As I discuss in the first chapter, at the fin de siècle environmental degenerationists like Cantlie, Fothergill, and Brabazon insisted that the unnatural conditions of urban slums were degrading their inhabitants and lamented the lack of open, natural places accessible to working-class citizens. As such, the passage above introduces the novella's implicit thesis that the "artificial" and abysmal environment of the poor was, in fact, slowly morphing them into Morlocks—that is, inhuman and vengeful beasts who were adapted to such brutal conditions of existence.

While the Time Traveller explicitly compares the Morlocks to various animal species, the descriptions of the Morlocks more subtly liken them to the supposedly degenerate denizens of the Victorian netherworld. Indeed, as MacDonald's goblins recall their human forebears, the text suggests the Morlocks bear traces of their human ancestors' environmentally-inflicted defects on their bodies and thus presses the reader to reflect on the degraded condition of the urban poor. For example, the Time Traveller notes their "etiolated pallor" (41), "small" stature (38), and hunched movement (38). In the years before Wells' published the final version of *The Time Machine*, commentators routinely pointed to the small, pallid, and crooked bodies of working-class "town dwellers" as warning signs that the city was causing widespread and progressive deterioration. For example, in the lecture "Degeneration Amongst Londoners" (1885), James Cantlie argues that "the close confinement and the foul air of our cities are . . . raising up a puny and ill-developed race" with "pale waxy" faces (33, 21).

Except for being entirely below ground, the Morlocks' city has all the characteristics of London's poor and industrial neighborhoods, including "the close confinement and foul air" that Cantlie claimed were the primary causes of degeneration. During the scene when the Time



Traveller recounts his visit to the underworld, his frantic account paints it as over-crowded, utterly dark, airless, and fetid—everything the environmental degenerationists blamed for the residuum’s state of unfitness. It furthermore appears as a vast maze full of “great shapes like big machines,” “gutters and tunnels” that house hordes and hordes of Morlocks who were ready to maim him (44). Ultimately, the Time Traveller’s description of the subterranean metropolis highlights the degrading and unnatural nature of Victorian London’s poor districts, which wealthier citizens saw as a vast and disorienting netherworld that sheltered a mob of home-grown savages just waiting to attack them (McClintock 119; Stedman Jones 14).

Indeed, like MacDonald’s vengeful goblins, the Morlocks’ violent behavior expresses the Victorians’ anxious and interrelated fantasies that the degenerate victims of the urban-industrial underground would surge up against them and usher in their extinction. The Morlocks’ cannibalism signals their savagery, yes, but it also serves as a warning that the vengeful and inhuman underclass may assume the position of power and *consume* their former oppressors. When the Time Traveller describes the moment he realized the Morlocks eat the Eloi, he tells his audience that he tried to shield himself “from the horror” by considering it an apt punishment for the “selfishness” of people who “had been content to live in ease and delight upon the labours of his fellow-man,” but he could not. He explains: “However great their intellectual degradation, the Eloi had kept too much of the human form not to claim my sympathy, and to make me perform a sharer in their degradation and their Fear” (50). The language here indicates that the Time Traveller was horrified because he and the Eloi share a common humanity that the Morlocks lack, but also because he sees himself in them. They are the closest remains of evolution’s finest creation—the British race. Thus, when the Morlocks eat the Eloi, they are devouring his racial kin.

Far more explicitly than the symbolic *Princess and the Goblin*, therefore, *The Time Machine* illustrates the violent consequences of ghettoizing the poor in the so-called netherworld and highlights the need for reform that would lift them from the degenerative abyss before the damage was irreparable. As Arata, Greenslade, Hurley, and other scholars illustrate, nineteenth- and early-twentieth century British fiction about degeneration was motivated by and gives voice to the widespread fear that biological decay would be the end of the British race, civilization, and even humanity. What we do not yet fully appreciate is that much of this fiction is environmentalist, and thus illuminates the intersections between degeneration theory and Victorian environmental thought. *The Time Machine*, *The Princess and the Goblin*, and *The Water-Babies* are just three “fictions of degeneration” that record the Victorians’ belief that the environment of the poor was hardening class into race, effectively transforming them into monsters who threatened to drag the British down from their place at the top of the racial and evolutionary hierarchy. These works argue that working-class degeneracy was an *environmental* problem and thus advocate for solutions to match.

## Chapter Four

### Tropical Degeneration and The Island of Doctor Moreau

Urban degeneration theory grew out of the conviction that the environment determined racial constitutions and, therefore, that alien places could alter them. As I explained in chapter one, this understanding of race also underpinned the concept of tropical degeneration. From the second half of the nineteenth century until well into the twentieth, it was widely considered a scientific fact that the tropics (or the “torrid zone”) caused white people to degenerate physically and psychologically, to become “tropicalized” or “go native.” Consequently, the British viewed the tropical environment like the modern city: as a threat to their racial identity and continued supremacy. Throughout those years, they strove to ameliorate its malevolent influence through environmental management and an elaborate set of hygienic practices.

To the British and other white colonists, the tropical environment was mirrored in the primitive, savage people they believed it had produced. Colonists feared its ability to strip them of their physical health, drive them to madness, and—above all—make them savage too (Anderson, “Disease” 64; Cocks 219; Kennedy, “Mind” 28-29; Rogers 34-35). Nevertheless, they also admired its exoticism. A passage from Ralph Abercromby’s *Seas and Skies in Many Latitudes, or Wanderings in Search of Weather* (1888) illustrates their Janus-faced attitude toward tropical places:

When you sail from England, and pass out of the storms and chilly mists of the North Atlantic ... and at last reach a beautiful green country where strange and graceful forms of fruits and foliage flourish with an unknown luxuriance, it is difficult to believe that a land so fair can be so deadly, and that you have come to

a climate which will sooner or later destroy all energy, and even if it does not kill, may return you a wreck to your native shores. (367)

Indeed, at the time colonial medical professionals and other commentators fixated on the physical and psychological symptoms of tropicalized “wreck[s]” as signs of individual *and* widespread racial decline. Like its urban counterpart, anything abnormal could be considered evidence of tropical degeneration. For example, in *The Book of Climates* (1891), Daniel Henry Cullimore argues that among many other afflictions, anemia, muscle and fat loss, and “nervous affections” are all indicators of “racial deterioration” caused by exposure to the tropical climate (5-6, 8, 31). These “nervous affections” could include neurasthenia (which was also known as “nerves,” “nervousness,” and “nerve exhaustion”), a catch-all condition that—like the degeneration it spoke of—presented many and varied symptoms. Among other ailments, physicians considered depression, ennui, hypochondria, exhaustion, backache, and irritability telltales of the disorder (Crozier 525; Kennedy, “Minds” 32).<sup>49</sup> However, colonists also believed the tropical environment could cause more severe mental illnesses with symptoms like psychosis and paranoia. In other words, they thought the heat, the scorching sun, the humidity, and the overwhelming plant life—in addition to the constant contact with “savage” peoples—could drive white people crazy.

Environmental degeneration theory shaped literary representations of tropical places (real and imagined) and Europeans who lived and travelled in them. As Patrick Brantlinger shows, “going native” was a dominant theme of the “imperial Gothic” genre that emerged in the late

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<sup>49</sup> For more detailed discussions of the tropics and neurasthenia, see Anna Crozier, “What Was Tropical about Tropical Neurasthenia? The Utility of the Diagnosis in the Management of British East Africa” (2009) and Dane Kennedy, “Minds in Crisis: Medico-moral Theories of Disorder in the Late Colonial World” (2016).

Victorian period (*Rule 230*). Across genres, though, British literature from the degenerationist era is rife with descriptions that paint the tropical environment as a malevolent, degrading force, and characters whose minds and bodies are ruined or nearly ruined by exposure to it (most famously, Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* [1899]). Alongside medical and scientific writing, these works fed the fear of environmentally-driven degeneration that motivated the British's treatment of "dark" places. This chapter and the next focus on two such texts: H.G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911).

### **Tropicalized Prendick**

Published the year after *The Time Machine* appeared in book form, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* is also a dark meditation on degeneration's implications. Framed by an introductory statement by the protagonist's nephew, the novel presents Edward Prendick's written account of his experience as a castaway on a tropical Pacific island where a mad scientist, Moreau, strives to make perfect humans from vivisected animals with the help of his assistant, Montgomery. They are all degenerates: Moreau, Montgomery, the Beast People, and even Prendick.

There is a large body of scholarship on the novel's degenerate figures. For example, Kelly Hurley, Anne Stiles, and Ed Block all argue convincingly that Wells modelled the monomaniac and sociopathic Moreau off late nineteenth-century theories about genius, insanity, and degeneration (Block 466; Hurley 109-110; Stiles "Literature"). Hurley and Mason Harris (who builds on Hurley's analysis) both show that Montgomery's effeminacy, alcoholism, and implied homosexuality mark him as degenerate (Hurley 108-109; Harris 40-42). Furthermore, they both point out the physical resemblance between the not-quite-human Beast People and

Cesare Lombroso's "atavistic 'criminal' type" (Hurley 103; Harris 37-40).<sup>50</sup> Others, including Brantlinger and Theodora Goss, show that the Beast People also represent savages whose supposed degeneracy the Victorians believed prevented them from becoming civilized (Brantlinger, *Taming Cannibals* 188; Goss 311, 317). More generally, scholars agree, the Beast People manifest the anxiety endemic to the post-Darwinian era that humans might revert into animals.

Likewise, critics concur that Prendick's gradual mental and physical deterioration throughout the novel is a commentary about the possibility of humans sinking back into animality (Hurley 111-112; Rohman 122). In Goss's succinct words, he "becomes both savage and animal" (348). However, most scholars do not recognize the environment's pivotal role in Prendick's descent into degeneracy. The exception is Rebecca Weaver-Hightower, who briefly discusses the novel in her study of castaway narratives. She astutely remarks that Moreau's island *and* its human-animal occupants infect Prendick with a "*bestial taint*" (Wells, qtd. in Weaver-Hightower 139; original emphasis). He consequently "goes native" (140). Even so, her reading focuses almost entirely on Prendick's contact with the Beast People. Here, I build on Weaver-Hightower's point, arguing that even before Prendick arrives on the island, the environment helps transform him into a deranged, tropicalized invalid. The novel consequently echoes tropical degeneration theory, implying that the savage environment itself could render white bodies and minds degenerate.

Prendick's decline begins in the first chapter, which opens after "the loss of the *Lady Vain*" (73). The shipwreck has stranded him at sea in a dinghy with two men, an unnamed sailor

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<sup>50</sup> The quote here is Hurley's.

and another passenger called Helmar. Together, fear, dehydration, hunger, and the merciless tropical sun cause all three to deteriorate apace:

We drifted famishing, and, after our water had come to an end, tormented by an intolerable thirst, for eight days altogether. . . . After the first day we said little to one another, and lay in our places in the boat and stared at the horizon, or watched, with eyes that grew larger and more haggard every day, the misery and weakness gaining upon our companions. The sun became pitiless. (74)

Although readers today are likely to gloss over Prendick's comment about the "pitiless" sun, Wells' contemporaries would find it significant.

From the beginning of European colonialism, the British and other westerners thought the tropical sun was uniquely dangerous to white races (Kennedy, "The Perils" 118). During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, medical authorities and race theorists argued specifically that it was one source of tropical degeneration, which manifested in stigmata like nervousness, insanity, suicidal despair, or "savage" behaviors. For instance, in *The Book of Climates*, Cullimore claims "the powerful sun" of the equatorial zone causes "racial deterioration" (17). It was thus imperative for colonists to shield themselves from the sun's damaging rays by remaining indoors at midday (if possible), abstaining from physical labor, and wearing protective attire whenever they were outdoors (Johnson; Livingstone, "Tropical Climate" 109; Wear 39-40, 42). As Will Jackson puts it, "defence against the sun meant protection of the race" (2).

Adrift in the equatorial Pacific Ocean, though, Prendick and the other survivors are completely exposed to the tropical sun, and it helps drive their swift descent into savages. When their water runs out on the fourth day, the men are desperate and already thinking about

cannibalism, which the Victorians considered “the nadir of savagery, the complete antithesis of civilization” (Brantlinger, *Taming Cannibals* 66). On the sixth day, Prendick explains, “Helmar gave voice to the thing we had all been thinking.” Although Prendick initially resists Helmar’s plan “to draw lots” and cannibalize the loser, after spending a night terrified the other men will kill and consume him, he concedes to it (74). The moment signals his transformation into a savage.

Circumstance saves Prendick from becoming a cannibal, but Wells makes it clear that he would have become one to save himself, thus emphasizing his desperation and resultant savagery. After Prendick agrees to Helmar’s proposal, the men draw lots, which marks the sailor as “the odd man.” He attacks Helmar, and they begin to fight. Murderous, Prendick moves toward them, “intending to help Helmar by grasping the sailor’s leg” (74). However, before he can reach them, the two men fall overboard and disappear underwater.

Prendick’s reaction further suggests that the combined stress of fear, dehydration, starvation, and environmental exposure has already damaged his mind as well as his body. His first response to the sight of the sailor and Helmar sinking “like stones” is to laugh, which surprises him: “The laugh caught me suddenly like a thing from without.” After this inappropriate response, despair quickly overcomes him. Weakness is the only thing that keeps him from suicide: “I lay across one of the thwarts for I know not how long, thinking that if I had the strength I would drink sea-water and madden myself to die quickly.” He then becomes resigned to his fate. Later, he becomes delusional and fancies he is already dead. Consequently, when he sees the *Ipecacuanha* in the distance, he watches the schooner approach “with no more interest than if it had been a picture” and makes no “attempt to attract attention” (75). When it reaches him, sunstroke, dehydration, and starvation have nearly stripped him of consciousness.



Aboard the *Ipecacuanha*, Montgomery brings Prendick back from the brink of death. However, Wells offers details that indicate he is still physically and mentally fragile, and therefore, once he arrives on Moreau's island, more vulnerable to its maddening influence than he would be otherwise. When Prendick comes to after lying "insensible" for over a day, he has no memory of the prior events. However, the sight of his thin hand, "a dirty skin-purse full of loose bones," and Montgomery's explanation that they found him "in a boat, starving" brings "all the business of the boat back to" his mind (76). He has the sense not to tell Montgomery about the cannibalism plot, but his thoughts come "slowly" and he can only speak "in concise sentences" because he is "horribly weak" (76-77).

Prendick breaks down completely when the captain of the *Ipecacuanha* sets him adrift again after they arrive at Moreau's island. "[A]lternately despairful [sic] and desperate" (86), as he waits to be thrown overboard, Prendick cannot help but laugh inappropriately—as he did when Helmar and the sailor fell out of the *Lady Vain's* dinghy. He knows he is too frail to save himself. Once the crew toss him back into the dinghy and cut him loose, he becomes "hysterical" (87). Prendick attributes his unmanly reaction to the effects of environmental exposure, evoking the contemporary notion that the tropics could ruin a man:

I was still weak . . . from my exposure in the boat; I was empty and very faint, or I should have had more heart. But as it was I suddenly began to sob and weep, as I had never done since I was a little child. The tears ran down my face. In a passion of despair I struck with my fists at the water in the bottom of the boat, and kicked savagely at the gunwale. I prayed aloud for God to let me die. (87)

Although he composes himself once he realizes the islanders have turned around to save him, Prendick's "hysterical phase" (88) in this scene underscores the fact that he arrives on Moreau's

island a wreck. The week adrift near the equator has already set him on the course of becoming fully and irreparably tropicalized. The roughly ten and a half months he spends on the island completes his transformation.

The coordinates Prendick's nephew provides in the introduction place the fictional island relatively close to the Galapagos, the archipelago where Darwin made the observations that inspired him to develop this theory of evolution (Wells, *Island* 71).<sup>51</sup> As a great many scholars have pointed out, the island's location highlights the novel's evolutionary themes. Most readings of *The Island of Doctor Moreau* additionally note the island's geographical isolation, which allows Moreau to perform his evolutionary experiments without interference and makes it unlikely that Prendick will be rescued or escape. It is "off the track to anywhere" (90).

The island's location also means that is far beyond the boundaries of the British Empire. This makes it even more dangerous than the colonial tropics, where imperialism's civilizing hand worked to protect Europeans from the malevolent environment's degenerative influence—in part by transforming it. Preoccupied with his experiments, Moreau has made no efforts to tame or improve the volcanic island. Instead, the small, "square enclosure" that contains his laboratory and living quarters sits amidst jungle wilderness: tropical nature at its wildest and therefore most dangerous. Prendick registers the island's alien wildness as he approaches it:

[The island] was low, and covered with thick vegetation—chiefly a kind of palm that was new to me. From one point a thin white thread of vapour rose slantingly to an immense height, and then frayed out like a down feather. We were now

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<sup>51</sup> As Mason Harris explains in a footnote in the Broadview Edition of *Moreau*, at more than six hundred miles away, the Galapagos would still be the closest land (Wells, *Island* 71n5).

within the embrace of a broad bay flanked on either hand by a low promontory. The beach was of dull-grey sand, and sloped steeply up to a ridge, perhaps sixty or seventy feet above the sea-level, and irregularly set with trees and undergrowth. Half way up was a square enclosure of some greyish stone, which I found subsequently was built partly of coral and partly of pumiceous lava. Two thatched roofs peeped from within this enclosure. (89)

Although here Prendick reacts neutrally to the island's wild, unfamiliar appearance, later in the novel its savage environment becomes one of the forces that leaves him degenerate.

John Glendening interprets the island's jungle as a metaphor for evolutionary and mental confusion. Furthermore, he claims that the frenzied descriptions of the landscape reflect Prendick's "cognitive and ethical turmoil" (584). Prendick, he writes,

projects his mental state onto nature, and nature itself, when interpreted apart from comforting ideologies and evasions, readily enables a confused experience fraught with indeterminacy. Prendick's confusion results from the inability of his internalized cultural nature any longer to impose order on an external nature that encourages the disruption of mental and moral categories. *The ultimate source of confusion is Prendick's mind*, which, unable to assimilate his experiences to his self-conceptualizing codes and constructs, must interpret the external world as confusion. With its resistances to vision, orientation, and movement, and with its dizzying superabundance of phenomena, the jungle is the form of nature that most readily promotes confusion and entanglement. (584, emphasis added)

Setting aside the fact that this passage unwittingly upholds Eurocentric ideas about tropical nature that are inextricably linked with racism and imperialism, Glendening's argument overlooks the fact that during this period, colonists thought the jungle—nature at its darkest—could shatter a person's mind and thus render them degenerate. This is exactly what happens to Prendick. Yes, his mind becomes a confused jungle, but the tropical island's debilitating, savage, and ultimately maddening landscape helps make it so.

This is manifest when Prendick—soon after his arrival on the island—flees into the forest to escape the sound of the puma's cries as Moreau tortures the animal inside his laboratory. Prendick moves quickly through the jungle, which is close with "masses of thicket" and "undergrowth" (97). When he finally stops, Prendick realizes the thick forest has "deadened any sound that might be coming from the enclosure" (97). Consequently, he briefly finds psychological relief in the jungle. He sits down to rest, and admires the exotic scene: "The place was a pleasant one" (98).

After some time, Prendick begins to think about Montgomery's servant, who he does not yet know is a man made from beasts, but whose uncanny appearance troubles him. However, Prendick explains, "it was too hot to think elaborately, and presently I fell into a tranquil state between dozing and waking" (98). This detail reflects the Victorians' belief that the tropical heat caused white bodies and minds to become torpid, which they considered an early sign of degeneration, or going native (Wear 39). In *Seas and Skies at Many Latitudes*, Abercromby goes further, arguing that the heat immediately strips its victims of their "superfluous energy" and eventually inflicts permanent damage to their "nervous and physical strength" (365). By noting the heat's effect on Prendick's cognitive function, Wells subtly signals that the environment is tropicalizing him.

Prendick's peace is shattered when the jungle's pleasant veneer gives way to reveal its savageness. When "a rustling amidst the greenery" rouses him, he sees "a man, going on all-fours" to the stream, where he drinks "like a beast" (98). In this moment, the forest transforms permanently from a haven into a horrorscape, a beautiful, labyrinthine hell that frays Prendick's already-fragile mind.

The subsequent scene recalls George Hartwig's description of the jungle's psychological effects in *Wonders of the Tropical Forest* (1888). He claims that although the "mystery" of an untouched tropical forest's "impenetrable thickets" can delight the imagination, its tangled, superabundant plant life can also overwhelm the senses and leave its visitors frantic and paranoid. The

imagination also peoples the forest with peculiar terrors; for man feels himself here surrounded by an alien, or even hostile nature: the solitude and silence of the woods weigh heavily on his mind; in every rustling of the falling leaves a venomous snake seems ready to dart forth; and who knows what ravenous animal may not be lurking in the dense underwood that skirts the tangled path. (11)

In the novel, the jungle addles Prendick's imagination in just this manner, leaving it "disordered" (103). After Prendick and the islander lock eyes, the beastly man retreats, disappearing into the forest. Prendick becomes intensely nervous, worried about what else the thicket and undergrowth might conceal. He explains, "The apparition of this grotesque, half-bestial creature ... suddenly populated the stillness of the afternoon for me" (98).

Prendick thus starts to move cautiously, striving to see through the impenetrable forest, and is "startled by a great patch of vivid scarlet on the ground" (99). After inspecting the patch,

Prendick is relieved to find that it is not blood, but “a peculiar fungus, branched and corrugated like a foliaceous lichen, but deliquescing into slime at the touch” in a manner reminiscent of a decomposing corpse. Indeed, the gothic fungus leads him to the body of a decapitated rabbit, lying “in the shadow of some luxuriant ferns” (99).

Horried, Prendick gazes upon the torn body and “scattered blood” (99). The sight sharpens his fear because—the subtext reads—he imagines himself in the rabbit’s place. Consequently, he explains, “The thicket about me became altered to my imagination. Every shadow became something more than a shadow—became an ambush; every rustle became a threat. Invisible things seemed watching me.” He decides he will be safer in Moreau’s enclosure, and moves “violently, possibly even frantically, through the bushes, anxious to get a clear space about [him] again” (99).

The “green confusion” imprisons and misdirects Prendick as he strives to get back to the beach and the compound, and thus heightens his traumatizing fear (101). Although he comes upon a small glade, it is “closed in” by “dense growth of stems and twining vines and splashes of fungus and flowers” (99). More importantly, it contains “three grotesque human figures” (99). Since they have not seen him, Prendick observes the creatures for some time, noting their animal behavior and “unmistakable mark of the beast” on their bodies (100). Even more horrified than before, he retreats “back into the bushes” and moves timidly, terrified “of being discovered” (101). Out of his mind, Prendick unwittingly steps into another glade and stumbles upon the “brute ... Thing” he had seen at the stream earlier. This encounter ends when the creature leaps into “the undergrowth” and disappears “into the dusk” (101).

Worried now about the coming darkness, Prendick sets off again in what he thinks is the way to Moreau’s compound. However, his addled mind prevents him from thinking clearly and

thus navigating the darkening jungle, which becomes even more impenetrable and confusing as the light diminishes. When Prendick realizes his mistake, he becomes even more panicked than he was previously, especially when he senses “another presence” following him.

I walked eagerly, my mind confused with many things, and presently found myself in a level place among scattered trees. The colourless clearness that comes after the sunset flush was darkling; ... the interspaces of the trees, the gaps in the further vegetation, that had been hazy blue in the daylight, grew black and mysterious. I pushed on. The colour vanished from the world. The tree-tops rose against the luminous blue sky in inky silhouette, and all below that outline melted into one formless blackness. Presently the trees grew thinner, and the shrubby undergrowth more abundant. Then there was a desolate space covered with a white sand, and then another expanse of tangled bushes. I did not remember crossing the sand-opening before. I began to be tormented by a faint rustling upon my right hand. (102)

The descriptions when Prendick is fleeing his stalker suggest that the jungle is closing in upon him, working in tandem with his predator to drive him into a hysterical panic. In the dark, Prendick cannot distinguish the difference between the close trees, the undergrowth, and his stalker—all become one terrorizing force. Even though he hears the creature “stumble” behind him, because the dark forest defies perception, he cannot be sure that the stalker is not a figment of his panicked imagination:

I turned suddenly, and stared at the uncertain trees behind me. One black shadow seemed to leap into another. I listened, rigid, and heard nothing but the creep of the blood in my ears. I thought that my nerves were unstrung, and that my

imagination was tricking me, and turned resolutely towards the sound of the sea again. (103)

Prendick then emerges on to the beach, but he realizes that he is still far from Moreau's compound.

The scene comes to its climax when the creature emerges out of the forest, confirming Prendick's fear that his stalker was not merely a phantasm. When he picks up a piece of volcanic stone to throw at the creature, it retreats momentarily. Prendick forms a rough weapon from the rock and his handkerchief. Weapon in hand, he begins to sweat and tremble with terror, and then convinces himself to move back through "the trees and bushes" to Moreau's beach (104). At that moment, the creature makes chase. Already panicked, Prendick succumbs to panic: "I completely lost my head with fear, and began running ... I gave a wild cry" (104). Although Prendick escapes without bodily harm, he emerges from his first journey through the forest deeply traumatized.

Later, after Montgomery has died and the enclosure has burned down, the entire island becomes as dangerous as the forest. Without shelter, Prendick is completely exposed to the elements and the Beast People, who have begun their inevitable reversion back into animals and are increasingly threatening to him. This realization panics Prendick, who is wholly aware of his delicate condition:

A dreadful thing that I was only beginning to realise was, that over all this island there was now no safe place where I could be alone and secure to rest or sleep. I had recovered strength amazingly since my landing, but I was still inclined to be nervous and to break down under any great stress. I felt that I ought to cross the



island and establish myself with the Beast People, and make myself secure in their confidence. But my heart failed me. . . . I sat, chin on knees, the sun beating down upon my head and unspeakable dread in my mind, plotting how I could live on against the hour of my rescue (if ever rescue came). I tried to review the whole situation as calmly as I could, but it was difficult to clear the thing of emotion.

(160-161)

Left with no other option, Prendick finds temporary safety with the Dog-man and other friendly Beast People, and moves in to one of their empty huts in the forest. In other words, he goes native, becoming “one among the Beast People in the Island of Doctor Moreau” (162).

Prendick marks this as the moment he goes native, but—as I discussed earlier—the text indicates that this conversion began long before, when he was adrift in the dinghy. Nevertheless, without Montgomery or Moreau’s humanizing company or the compound’s shelter, Prendick’s deterioration accelerates. After explaining the Beast People’s reversion, Prendick notes his own degraded state. His tanned skin and mad eyes recall common symptoms of environmentally-driven tropical degeneration, suggesting that it is not just contact with the Beast People that has caused him to become savage, animal, and demented: “I too must have undergone strange changes. My clothes hung about me as yellow rags, through whose rents showed the tanned skin. My hair grew long, and became matted together. I am told that even now my eyes have a strange brightness, a swift alertness of movement” (168).

After he is rescued, Prendick returns to England a wreck, a “madman” whose trauma makes him unfit for human company (172). The island has permanently scarred his mind: “I do not expect that the terror of that island will ever altogether leave me. At most times it lies far in the back of my mind, a mere distant cloud, a memory, and a faint distrust; but there are times

when the little cloud spreads until it obscures the whole sky” (172). Consequently, he cannot stand the “confusion of cities” and lives instead “near the broad free downland” where the open landscape hides no threats (173). Although Prendick blames the Beast People for his condition, Wells subtly indicates throughout the novel that the tropical environment is also responsible for his mental degeneracy. Like other Victorian and Modernist novels set in the tropics, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* consequently affirms the idea that the environment of the tropics could help render white bodies and minds degenerate.

## Chapter Five

### The Tropicalized Child and Racial Regeneration in *The Secret Garden*

Published serially in 1910 by *The American Magazine* and in book form one year later, British-born and naturalized American author Frances Hodgson Burnett's best-known novel, *The Secret Garden*, shares *The Island of Doctor Moreau*'s concern with tropical degeneration. The first half of the narrative focuses on the racial redemption of ten-year-old Mary Lennox, who is brought to Yorkshire, England to live with her uncle after her parents—a colonial administrator and his negligent, shallow wife—die of a cholera outbreak in India. At the beginning of the novel, Mary is the epitome of the dreaded degenerate Anglo-Indian child. She is torpid, scrawny, yellow, sickly, and short-tempered, even cruel. In other words, she is racially unfit. Once Mary arrives at Misselthwaite Manor (her uncle's home), the salubrious Yorkshire environment quickly begins to heal her, redirecting her development so that she becomes strong, well-tempered, and appropriately English. This plot reflects the contemporary belief that the children of colonial administrators must be sent home so that they do not grow up tropicalized and become a threat to racial purity. Indeed, *The Secret Garden* echoes contemporary childrearing recommendations, showing its readers how to redeem children damaged by the tropics. Like Kingsley's *The Water-Babies*, the novel suggests that relocating children affected by environmentally-driven degeneration to the salubrious nature of the English countryside will redirect their development and ensure they grow up physically, morally, and—above all—racially fit.

Deemed a classic of Golden Age children's literature in the mid-twentieth century even though it was initially received as an adult novel (Lundin 279), *The Secret Garden* and its many adaptations have received profuse critical attention since the field of children's literature

criticism began to grow in the 1970s (Lundin 279, 286). These studies, many of which examine the novel through an explicitly feminist lens, have focused primarily on its engagement with the politics of gardening; issues of gender, race, and class; and the Christian Science and New Thought movements that inspired Burnett and others searching for alternative spiritual and healing practices at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, despite its heightened status within the academic canon and the number of excellent studies that focus on health, healing, and New Thought ideas in the text, no scholar has discussed how the novel intervenes in the debates about tropical degeneration and children that permeated British culture at the time. Critics such as Elizabeth Buettner and Danielle E. Price have notably discussed Mary's tropicality and her transformation from an ill-tempered, Indianized child into an appropriately feminine English one, but they do not link the novel to the larger literary response to anxieties about tropical degeneration. Other scholars, such as Jerry Phillips, argue vaguely that the novel reflects "a contemporary social discourse concerned with weakened, stunted, and indolent children's bodies" and fears of "national decline" (177-178), but decline to delve further into the subject. Furthermore, scholars focused on degeneration and literature have entirely ignored *The Secret Garden*. This chapter unveils the novel's preoccupation with tropical degeneration and argues that it intervenes in the perceived crisis of racial unfitness by showing how to cure a tropicalized child.

### **Healing Mary Lennox**

The plot of Mary's transformation from a sickly, ugly, and "contrary" child into a healthy, sweet, and beautiful one occupies the first half of the novel before she discovers her cousin Colin and the narrative focus shifts primarily to his recovery. Her story draws directly from racial-imperial discourses about the developmental dangers tropical environments posed to

white children that emerged as the empire gradually, yet dramatically, filled with families in the nineteenth century, and persisted well into the twentieth (Pomfret 2). At the time, the condition of British and European children like Mary who were exposed to the climates of India and the other so-called tropical, intemperate colonies vexed physicians, parents, and colonial officials alike since such places were believed to be, in the perfunctory words about India from Burnett's earlier novel *A Little Princess* (1905), "very bad for children" (2). Abercromby voices this common belief in *Seas and Skies in Many Latitudes*: "Children, born in the Tropics, are rarely strong, while if they are reared there, they either die young or grow up with such constitutions that their lives are a burden to themselves and their friends" (367).

During the degenerationist era, colonists believed children were especially vulnerable to the morbid effects of physically and culturally intemperate places (Buettner 30, 33; Pomfret 25). Medical experts and parents alike believed children, like Mary, who were exposed to such environments would degenerate and thus should be sent home "as soon as possible" (Burnett, *Little Princess* 2). The wholesome physical, racial, and cultural climate of home, they thought, would quickly undo any damage inflicted by the colonial environment and help the child grow into a healthy, racially fit adult (Buettner 47, 52). *The Secret Garden* reassuringly fictionalizes this process.

Medical reports and domestic manuals written for the colonial housewife throughout the era of high imperialism vigorously described the dangers of the tropical environment and the supposedly telltale signs of childhood degeneracy. Almost without fail, these manuals argued that parents must send their children home to family or boarding schools in Britain well before puberty—usually between the ages five and eight lest they grow up degenerate (Buettner 33, Wear 36). They believed the race depended on it. As Elizabeth Buettner puts it, the practice was

“seen as the key to preserving their European attributes that would otherwise deteriorate over time, culminating in their becoming permanent residents whose descendants were doomed to die out” (33). Surgeon general William Moore argued this point in his essay from the 1890-91 edition of the *Transactions of the Epidemiological Society of London*. In it, he claimed that acclimatization is impossible “for the white man and his offspring ... in India [or] in other tropical countries” (Moore 33). While “The deteriorating process” may be “slow”, it is nevertheless “certain” and “hereditary” (35), and each generation is born weaker than the one before it until eventually they are unable “propagate the race” (44). Children raised India, he further cautioned, may appear to be “strong and healthy in their youth,” but they—especially females—eventually and inevitably show, like Mary, “signs of constitutional weakness” (40). In another article published by the same journal several years earlier, Joseph Ewart presented an identical argument, claiming that more than anyone “our children” demonstrate “the degeneracy of our race” and consequently must be sent home from the tropics no later than “their fifth or sixth year” (98, 116) lest they, as Edward John Tilt put it vaguely in 1875, “grow up sickly in mind and body” (3).

Writers like Moore, Ewart, and Tilt repeatedly made similarly vague and mostly untested declarations that white children in India who did not die were physiologically and psychologically unhealthy, weak, and inferior to their peers at home (Buettner 46). They were, in a word, perceived to be unfit. R.S. Mair, for example, described such children as “feeble in mind ... [and] body”, “pale”, “flabby”, “delicate”, “timid”, “unstable”, “unhealthy [in] appearance”, and “seldom able to compete on equal terms, either physically or mentally, with those who have been brought up in England” (5; 127-128). Ewart called them “indolent” and “irritable,” and argued that they grew too quickly, becoming “thin”, “lanky”, and “lean” (116). Austin Robinson

warned mothers that children who grow up in the colonies are liable to become “puny and physically deficient adults” (viii) and that a chronically cranky and difficult child, like Mary, is so because of their poor health (82). In fact, any number of these descriptors might apply to Mary Lennox, who is “disagreeable-looking”, “yellow”, “sickly”, “fretful”, “ugly”, “tyrannical” (1), “languid” (29), “weak” (40), and “contrary” (7) before her transformation on English ground.

The same writers nevertheless reassured parents that their children “might remain relatively safe for their first few years” if they were sufficiently shielded from India’s cultural and environmental threats, both of which the British saw as agents of degeneracy (Buettner 33, 36). Manuals like Fayer’s *European Child-Life in Bengal* (1873), Edward A. Birch’s *The Management and Medical Treatment of Children in India* (4<sup>th</sup> edition, 1902), and Lilian Austin Robinson’s *The Health of Our Children in the Colonies: A Book for Mothers* (1906), provided extensive guidelines for how to do so, placing the burden of responsibility squarely on mothers’ shoulders (Buettner 44).<sup>52</sup> While some of these authors’ recommendations were unique to childcare and pediatric medicine, others were identical to the elaborate guidelines physicians gave to adults about diet, environmental exposure, clothing, seasonal migration, and more. As I have explained in previous chapters, these guidelines were designed to help the British maintain their health, vigor, moral certitude, and—above all—racial purity in debilitating tropical environments. These domestic and home medical guides demanded that mothers especially

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<sup>52</sup> Other titles include: R.S. Mair’s *Medical Guide for Anglo-Indians* (1874), Edward John Tilt’s *Health in India for British Women and On the Prevention of Disease in Tropical Climates* (4<sup>th</sup> edition, 1875), G. Mellin’s *The Care of Infants in India: A Work for Mothers and Nurses in India Upon the Feeding and Rearing of Infants* (5<sup>th</sup> edition, 1900), and G. Montago Harston’s *The Care and Treatment of European Children in the Tropics* (1912).

remain vigilant in their management of their children, the household, and the native servants, who were frequently blamed for lax sanitary and disciplinary practices, corrupting their young charges, and in general exposing them to degeneration and other dangers (Buettner 36-44). Furthermore, these texts castigated mothers who failed to nurture their children and manage their servants appropriately, arguing that maternal failure—like so much else—was caused at least in part by the climate (45). In other words, they argued that environmental degeneration caused British women to become bad mothers.

Before she comes to Misselthwaite Manor, then, Mary is doubly doomed. At nine years old, she has been kept in India too long, and before her parents' death her father and especially her mother neglect her, leaving her care entirely to her ayah and the other native servants. As Buettner, who uses *The Secret Garden* as a starting point for her discussion of British children in India, observes, "India's climate, 'native' population, and maternal ineptitude" combined "to make Mary unhealthy and domineering" (25). More specifically, it makes her racially unfit. The novel readily invites this interpretation, emphasizing early and emphatically that Mary has been marred by an unhealthy environment and neglect. The opening sentences convey this, placing the blame for her degenerate condition equally on India and her derelict mother:

When Mary Lennox was sent to Misselthwaite Manor to live with her uncle everybody said she was the most disagreeable-looking child ever seen. It was true, too. She had a little thin face and a little thin body, thin light hair and a sour expression. Her hair was yellow, and her face was yellow because she had been born in India and had always been ill in one way or another. Her father had held a position under the English Government and had always been busy and ill himself, and her mother had been a great beauty who cared only to go to parties and amuse



herself with gay people. She had not wanted a little girl at all, and when Mary was born she handed her over to the care of an Ayah who was made to understand that if she wished to please the Mem Sahib she must keep the child out of sight as much as possible. So when she was a sickly, fretful, ugly little baby she was kept out of the way, and when she became a sickly, fretful, toddling thing she was kept out of the way also. (3)

Burnett emphasizes that Mary's mother is only an acquaintance, someone she observes admiringly from afar and sees as a distant ruler rather than a *mother*, who should be her most intimate relation and shield her from India's manifold threats. In fact, Mrs. Lennox is so estranged from her daughter that Mary "could scarcely have been expected to love her or to miss her very much when she was gone." Indeed, she does not miss her, partly because her mother's negligence had allowed Mary to become a very "self-absorbed child" who "gave her entire thought to herself" and partly because, as the text makes clear, she was barely more than a stranger to the child (7). With their biting, pathos-filled descriptions of Mary's isolation and her mother, the two opening chapters make it clear that Mrs. Lennox's lack of maternal feeling and habitual inattention has left her daughter exposed to India's inherent developmental hazards and thus allowed her to become the sickly, contrary, and decidedly un-English tyrant who first arrives at Misselthwaite Manor.

On the morning the cholera reaches their compound, for example, Mary, who does not yet know about the outbreak, is left alone in the garden after the servants flee. When her mother appears on the nearby veranda with a young officer, she relishes the apparently rare opportunity to observe her. "The child stared [at the officer], but she stared most at her mother," the narrator explains:

She always did this when she had a chance to see her, because the Mem Sahib—Mary used to call her that oftener than anything else—was such a tall, slim, pretty person and wore such lovely clothes. Her hair was like curly silk and she had a delicate little nose which seemed to be disdainful things, and she had large laughing eyes. All her clothes were thin and floating, and Mary said they were ‘full of lace.’ (4)

The moment makes Mary’s alienation and yearning plain as it condemns her mother’s negligence and apparent vanity. Mrs. Lennox’s conversation with the officer, which Mary overhears, drives the characterization even further, suggesting that her death could have been avoided if she had taken her family “to the hills two weeks ago” rather than staying “to go to that silly dinner party” (4). In fact, the scene suggests that Mary’s mother is just as contrary and degenerate as she is.

Mrs. Lennox’s maternal failure means that before her arrival in Yorkshire, Mary’s only attachments are to the native servants in charge of her care (“She never remembered seeing familiarly anything but the dark faces of her Ayah and the other native servants” [3]), who let her become sickly, high-tempered, and “contrary.” Because they are afraid to “anger the Mem Sahib”, who does not want to be bothered by her child, the servants unflinchingly obey Mary and “give her her own way in everything” (3). Consequently, “by the time she was six years old she was as tyrannical and selfish a little pig as ever lived” (3). According to Buettner, mothers such as Mrs. Lennox were compelled by domestic manuals and doctors to carefully monitor and manage the relationships and interactions between children and their native caretakers. Servants were blamed along with the enervating, insalubrious climate for causing the “multiple bodily and character weaknesses” of the degenerate child since their laxity in sanitary and disciplinary standards supposedly left their charges vulnerable to physical deterioration and created horrible little

tyrants just like Mary (36, 39-40). R.S. Mair and other purveyors of this advice also argued that strong bonds between native women and their young charges were damaging, as the inappropriate intimacy and attachment caused children to adopt the uncivilized, inferior habits, languages, desires, and characteristics of the colonized (Buettner 39).

Even Mary's relationships with the servants are apparently only tenuous, however, since they also forget about her when the cholera comes, and Mary expresses no affection for Sadie, her ayah. Rather, she seems instinctually to know that the servants are utterly inferior and meant to be ordered about like chattel, unlike, as she learns quickly after her arrival, the Yorkshire servants at Misselthwaite (a detail which lets the novel's internalized racism shine).<sup>53</sup> While she does not appear to be in danger of loving her ayah too much, denied her mother's or even a consistent governess's love, intervention, and guidance (3), Mary has failed to acquire the characteristics that would make her a healthy and likeable British girl. Instead, India, neglect, and over-exposure to the native servants have made her a racially-degenerate despot who "doesn't know where home is!" (8).

Mary's voyage to England thus marks the beginning of her racial transformation. It is a pilgrimage home, as Jerry Phillips has called it (170), which plucks her from the degenerative climate of India and resituates her where she belongs, racially and culturally, on English soil and among people who embody its virtues. The environmentally-driven metamorphosis that Mary experiences there models the profound physical, mental, and behavioral changes that parents were promised would occur and indeed often reported did occur when they sent their at-risk children home from the colonies. It is a plot of acclimation to her true, natural home.

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<sup>53</sup> Jerry Phillips discusses the racial, class, and imperial politics of the novel and the distinction between Indian and English servants in some detail.

Immediately upon her arrival, the beneficent Yorkshire climate, healthy lifestyle, and virtuous people, who are closely linked with nature, begin to nurture and reshape her, gradually erasing the marks India left on her mind, body, and spirit.<sup>54</sup> As Price remarks, Martha, Ben, Mrs. Sowerby, and Dickon (the working-class characters in the novel) are “attached to the earth” and guide Mary “to assume a new manner of living, playing, and even speaking” (8). Indeed, as Mary’s physical and psychological health improve as a result of the healthful climate and her new lifestyle, so do her personality and mannerisms. She even drops her imperial, Indian style of speech and adopts the Yorkshire dialect spoken by Martha and the other working-class characters, a change that Price argues reveals her Anglicization (Price 8). By the end of the novel, she has become a nearly unrecognizable, newly Anglicized child who is mentally and physically vigorous, pretty, kind, and *nurturing*. In fact, the act of nurturing herself, the secret garden, and Colin (“cultivation,” as Price calls it) “transforms her, from sickly to healthy, from yellow to white, from Indian to English” (7), and effectively reconciles her with the conservative, gendered social order that allows her to fade into a supporting role and Colin to become the primary focus of the novel’s second half and especially its conclusion (Lennox Keyser; Dolan; Foster and Simons).

Still, her homecoming is initially trying and even traumatic. Unlike the children of the family she stays with after her parents’ death who tease her for not knowing “where home is” (8), Mary is completely unprepared for what she will encounter in England. Consequently, she arrives as a foreigner, a lost child of the colonies who sees England as alien and bears the effects of the tropical climate and maternal neglect equally on her body, mind, and temperament. While

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<sup>54</sup> I follow E.M. Collingham here, who argues, “the experience of India was” understood “to be written on the Anglo-Indian body” (2).

she has not exactly become native, Mary is not English in body or manner either; rather, her character exemplifies the dreaded tropicalized, degenerate child many feared would either die or grow to become “a kind of hybrid, inferior to both” the Indian and the European (Harrison 19). The novel’s insistent articulation of Mary’s tropicalized constitution and alienation transforms her into a spectacle, encouraging the reader to see her the same way Mrs. Medlock, the teenage housemaid Martha, and the gardener Ben Weatherstaff initially see her—as a shameful, pitiable product of the colonies. However, the omniscient narration also encourages the reader to affectively experience Mary’s perspective so that even as we observe her, we also gain access to her muddled, conflicting feelings of isolation, alienation, displeasure, and curiosity, and impressions of her new surroundings, which further emphasizes her outsider status and degenerate condition while making her worthy of sympathy and heightening the drama of her subsequent transformation.

When Mrs. Medlock, the housekeeper sent by Mr. Craven to fetch Mary from London, meets the girl, her initial expression of shock at Mary’s appearance makes “it ... very evident” that she “did not think much of her” (9). Mary, who does not like Mrs. Medlock either, fails to make a better impression when they embark on their journey the next morning:

Mary sat in her corner of the railway carriage and looked plain and fretful. She had nothing to read or to look at, and she had folded her thin little black-gloved hands in her lap. Her black dress made her look yellower than ever, and her limp light hair straggled from under her black crêpe hat.

“A more marred-looking young one I never saw in my life,” Mrs. Medlock thought. (Marred is a Yorkshire word and means spoiled and pettish.) (10)

Despite the parenthetical definition, the multiple meanings of “marred” push through, conveying that Mary is more than overindulged and petulant. Rather, India has marred her entire constitution. The outward signs of jaundice, pallor, a sour expression, limp hair, and scrawiness that mar her “rather good” features (9) are merely symptoms of the tropically-induced chronic illness, stunted growth, foul temper, and languor that have derailed her development and made her degenerate.

Although she appears outwardly “still” (10), Mary’s feelings oscillate on their journey from London to Yorkshire, ranging, for example, from disdain, disgust, curiosity, attraction, loneliness, and boredom as she takes in the unfamiliar people and place. For example, when Mrs. Medlock begins telling Mary about her uncle and her new, “queer” home “on the edge of the moor” (10), she cannot help but be interested because it all “sounded so unlike India” (11). Consequently, she listens intently, if begrudgingly, when Mrs. Medlock tells her about Mr. Craven’s crooked back and deceased wife, and, curiosity overcoming her, even asks the housekeeper what a moor is. Her fluctuating emotions and intermittent spurts of curiosity on their journey suggest that the new environment has already begun to stir Mary’s slow mind, hinting toward the transformation that begins in earnest upon her arrival at Misselthwaite Manor. For example, when she and the housekeeper disembark their train at the station where they will meet the carriage taking them to Misselthwaite, Mary turns an almost ethnographic eye on the unfamiliar scene around her, noting the “queer broad” Yorkshire dialect of the stationmaster, the persistent rain, and the smartness of the carriage and footman waiting for them (13). When they board the carriage, she settles into a seat by the window, “curious to see something of the road over which she was being driven to the queer place Mrs. Medlock had spoken of” (13) because, although “She was not at all a timid child and she was not exactly frightened, ... she felt that

there was no knowing what might happen in a house with a hundred rooms nearly all shut up—a house standing on the edge of a moor” (13).

The Gothic elements that emerge at this point compel the reader to experience the moor and then the mansion as Mary does, creating a sense of foreboding that, although fleeting, matches what she feels as she comes into contact with the new place and highlights her fragile emotional state (Foster and Simons 329). Since Mrs. Medlock had declined to answer Mary’s query about the moor, telling her instead that she could “look ... and ... see” for herself when they drive across it, Mary’s curiosity gradually turns to apprehension, which reaches a point when they finally come to it (13). Unsure what to expect, she looks out the window, where “the carriage lamps shed a yellow light on a rough-looking road which seemed to be cut through bushes and low growing things which ended in the great expanse of dark apparently spread out before and around them. A wind was rising and making a singular, wild, low, rushing sound” (14). The only comparison Mary can make is to the sea, and when she asks Mrs. Medlock if it is, her companion tells her it is “just miles and miles of wild land that nothing grows on but heather and gorse and broom, and nothing lives on but wild ponies and sheep” (14). This means little to Mary, and since she is unable to see more than the dim outlines of strange-looking plants amidst the seemingly endless darkness and can hear only the howling wind, she becomes overwhelmed by the sensory experience:

On and on they drove through the darkness, and though the rain stopped, the wind rushed by and whistled and made strange sounds. The road went up and down, and several times the carriage passed over a little bridge beneath which water rushed very fast with a great deal of noise. Mary felt as if the drive would never

come to an end and that the wide, bleak moor was a wide expanse of black ocean through which she was passing on a strip of dry land.

“I don’t like it,” she said to herself. “I don’t like it,” and she pinched her thin lips more tightly together. (14)

Although Mrs. Medlock is cheered when they see the lights of the manor’s gatehouse twinkling in the distance, Mary is not, still seeing everything that she will come to know and love as foreign and foreboding. To Mary, the property appears just as dark, alien, and threatening as the moor they just crossed. The avenue leading to the large, low house seems like “a long dark vault” and the house itself, which is almost completely unlit, appears unwelcoming (14-15). When they step inside, she shrinks before the suits of armor and portraits that line the walls around the entry, feeling and looking very “small and lost and odd” (15).

This feeling persists throughout Mary’s first days in Yorkshire as the disorienting, albeit ultimately beneficial, sensations of culture shock flood her. At the same time, however, Burnett makes it clear that Mary’s change begins immediately. For example, while her first interactions with Martha and Ben the morning after her arrival are as distressing as her journey across the moor, they also kick-start her rehabilitation by calling attention to her “contrary” qualities and encouraging new, healthy thoughts and habits, including her emerging, instinctual ecophilic interest in nature that leads her outdoors and to her garden-made redemption.

Like Mrs. Medlock, Martha and Ben are initially taken aback by Mary’s condition, and neither makes any attempt to shield her from their impressions of her pitiful condition and shocking behavior. Burnett portrays this as a kind of nurture, since their unaffected candor and refusal to coddle Mary, who is used to “obsequious and servile” Indian servants who “did not



presume to talk to their masters as if they were their equals” (16), at first shocks, angers, and unsettles the tyrannical child, but then rather quickly helps her understand why “people never like [her] and [she] never like[s] people” (23) and correct her errant thoughts, feelings, and habits, replacing them with new ones. When Martha, for example, confesses during their first meeting that she thought Mary “was a black” since she came from India (17), the child flies into a rage, but when Martha stolidly stands before her tantrum, she feels “helpless ... and horribly lonely and far away from everything she understood and which understood her” (18). She begins sobbing, and Martha comforts her. Much to Mary’s surprise, she finds that “there was something so comforting and really friendly in her queer Yorkshire speech and sturdy way which had a good effect on Mary. She gradually ceased crying and became quiet” (18).

Martha and Mary’s first encounter is an intervention punctuated by moments, like this one, of tension and difficulty that nevertheless begin to shift Mary’s thinking and behavior for the better, curbing some of her “contrariness” and leading her out into the garden and fresh air that heal her. Their interactions that first morning foreshadow their later relationship, when Martha becomes a quasi-maternal figure to Mary, a surrogate who carries Yorkshire virtues and her own mother’s wisdom and nurturing care to the child who so desperately needs it. While Martha’s “good-tempered, homely way” (19) immediately begins to soften the child’s indifference and disdain, at the same time her unabashed, rather scoffing exclamations of incredulous surprise at Mary’s brattish attitude, helplessness, and ignorance admonishes her. For example: Martha’s expression of shock upon learning that Mary cannot dress herself because “it was the custom” for her Ayah to do it causes Mary to correctly suspect that she would soon learn “a number of things quite new to her” (19). Likewise, when Martha’s stories about Dickon, her twelve-year-old brother who befriends the wild animals who live on the moor, ignite Mary’s

interest, it is the first time Mary has ever been “interested in any one but herself” (20). It is “the dawning of a healthy sentiment” which, after they clash again over Mary’s refusal to eat her breakfast porridge, prompts her to obey Martha’s order to go outside and work up an appetite (20-21).

Unlike Martha, who expresses a youthful interest in Mary, when she first meets Ben Weatherstaff in the garden, he does not appear “at all pleased to see” the contrary-looking child and is gruff when they speak, but he later softens toward her when she becomes vulnerable before him and an English robin that lives in the garden (22). After their initial brief, stilted introduction, Mary wanders on, looking for the deceased Mrs. Craven’s locked and deserted garden. She does not seem particularly bothered by Ben’s brusqueness until she spies a robin sitting on a high tree branch. When he bursts into song, it is like “he was calling to her” (23). His address makes her painfully aware of her loneliness and alienation, but it also interrupts it, giving her a brief moment of happiness and stoking her curiosity about her new home. The text suggests that at least subconsciously she is beginning to realize Yorkshire is not just different from India; it might also be better:

She stopped and listened to him and somehow his cheerful, friendly little whistle gave her a pleased feeling—even a disagreeable little girl may be lonely, and the big closed house and big bare moor and big bare gardens had made this one feel as if there was no one left in the world but herself. ... [T]he bright-breasted little bird brought a look into her sour little face which was almost a smile. She listened to him until he flew away. He was not like an Indian bird and she liked him and wondered if she should ever see him again. Perhaps he lived in the mysterious garden and knew all about it. (23)

The natural affinity she feels with the English bird excites and fills Mary with a new, unfamiliar pleasure and desire for kinship that apparently was not available nor did she know to want in India. Consequently, she seeks out Ben again, who finally takes an interest in the child when she tells him about the bird, which, as he later tells her, is “th’ only friend” he has (25). When he whistles and it reappears, landing right before them, Mary is in awe of the “pretty and cheerful” bird that “seemed so like a person” (24). She watches the robin carefully for some time as Ben kindly tells her about him, a “queer feeling” building “in her heart” until her emotions boil over and she confesses suddenly that she is lonely. Although she directs the confession to the bird, Ben responds, initiating a conversation that makes Mary deeply uncomfortable and self-aware, but which proves to be good for her:

“Art tha’ th’ little wench from India?” he asked.

Mary nodded.

“Then no wonder tha’rt lonely. Tha’lt be lonelier before tha’s done,” he said.

...

“I’m lonely mysel’ except when he’s with me,” and he jerked his thumb toward the robin. “He’s th’ only friend I’ve got.”

“I have no friends at all,” said Mary. “I never had. My Ayah didn’t like me and I never played with any one.”

It is a Yorkshire habit to say what you think with blunt frankness, and old Ben Weatherstaff was a Yorkshire moor man.

“Tha’ an’ me are a good bit alike,” he said. “We was wove out th’ same cloth. We’re neither of us good lookin’ an’ we’re both of us as sour as we look. We’ve got the same nasty tempers, both of us, I’ll warrant.”

This was plain speaking, and Mary Lennox had never heard the truth about herself in her life. Native servants always salaamed and submitted to you, whatever you did. She had never thought about her looks, but she wondered if she was as unattractive as Ben Weatherstaff and she also wondered if she looked as sour as he had looked before the robin came. She actually began to wonder also if she was “nasty tempered.” She felt uncomfortable. (25-26)

The self-consciousness that floods Mary as she takes in Ben’s candid assessment prompts a pivotal change in perspective that forces the child to see herself critically for the first time. While before Mary disliked other people, now suddenly she dislikes herself. Just as her earlier interest in Dickon was “the dawning of a healthy sentiment” (20), Burnett makes it clear that Mary’s new self-awareness is too, as it opens her to the nurturing natural and social influences that were not available in India but abound in her new home—including the robin, who, as much as Martha and Ben, encourages Mary’s interest in the outdoors.

Burnett portrays the bird as one of the many native forces at Misselthwaite that encourage Mary to adopt the healthy thoughts and habits that help her heal and bond her with the place and its people. His renewed song, for example, breaks the uneasy tension between Ben and Mary created by the gardener’s blunt speech, uniting them in delight and tentative kinship when Ben explains the robin has taken “a fancy” to the child and wants to “make friends” (26). The bird’s offer of friendship generates unfamiliar, warm-hearted feelings in Mary that cause a sudden

tangible change in the child's demeanor that surprises and delights the gardener, who responds encouragingly:

“Would you make friends with me?” she said to the robin just as if she was speaking to a person. “Would you?” And she did not say it either in her hard little voice or in her imperious Indian voice, but in a tone so soft and eager and coaxing that Ben Weatherstaff was ... surprised ...

“Why,” he cried out, ‘tha’ said that as nice an’ human as if tha’ was a real child instead of a sharp old woman. (26)

Burnett's emphasis on the way Mary's voice changes suggests that the new rush of feelings prompted by the possibility of friendship has an immediate corporeal and psychological effect on the child, wakening characteristics in her that had been repressed by the Indian environment and which others recognize as both appropriately human and childlike. The robin excites Mary's latent desire for friendship, and the pleasure she feels in his presence incites psychological changes that make her more agreeable and even more eager to explore the gardens, which further benefits her mind and body.

Mary's interest in the nonhuman natural world that surrounds the manor house appears as an emergent instinct that, like her capacity for kindness and desire for companionship, India had deadened, but which the English environment very quickly draws out. This emphasizes the supposedly natural—that is, innate, biological, and inherited—connection between the English child and England on which Burnett's plot depends. Despite her degeneracy, Mary possesses an inborn affinity for the native climate where she will thrive and consequently gravitates toward it and the people of it. Although she cannot pinpoint exactly why she feels so drawn to the secret

garden, the robin, Dickon, or the outdoors in general, she does. Consequently, even though she does not know it is good for her, she begins walking and running in the gardens every day (27), a habit that strengthens and invigorates her body, mind, and nature-loving instinct while bonding her to the place and its occupants.

Burnett links these processes, an alignment that suggests that the general improvements in Mary's personality, including her emergent interest and affection for subjects other than herself, are a direct consequence of her rapidly improving health and, consequently, the English environment. Whereas in "India she had always felt hot and too languid to care much about anything", the fresh English air "filled her lungs with something which was good for her whole thin body" and "had begun to blow the cobwebs out of her young brain and to waken her up a little" (27, 29). She even gains an appetite and begins eating her meals with gusto, shedding the finicky palate and poor appetite of the tropicalized child (27). Consequently, when she sees the robin a few days after their first meeting, she has the mental and physical energy to run happily, even playfully after him, laughing and shouting, "I like you! I like you!" (28). The contrast of this scene with Mary's first experience of the moor ("I don't like it ... I don't like it" [14]) signals how much she has already changed. It is the first time she plays or expresses joy, but the narration places particular emphasis on the fact that it also the first time "Poor little thin, sallow, ugly Mary ... actually looked almost pretty for a moment" (28). This pleasure intensifies and turns into curiosity when she realizes she is by the locked, abandoned garden. As she walks around the ivy-covered walls, musing about the mystery, she even begins "feel that she was not sorry that she had come to Misselthwaite Manor" (29).

Mary's growing appreciation and affection for Misselthwaite, the surrounding moor, and its occupants and her subsequent desire to improve and immerse herself in nature develops at

pace with the steady improvement in her health and temperament. As she begins to feel better and finds herself liking the place and its people, she starts to reflect critically on herself and the differences between Yorkshire and India more frequently and with more intention to acclimate. Martha and, to a slightly lesser degree, Ben help her do so by encouraging healthy behaviors and teaching her about Yorkshire nature and culture. For example, one morning, she wakes, looks out the window, and finds that the dreary moor has become beautiful:

The rain-storm had ended and the gray mist and clouds had been swept away in the night by the wind. The wind itself had ceased and a brilliant, deep blue sky arched high over the moorland. Never, never had Mary dreamed of a sky so blue. In India skies were hot and blazing; this was of a deep cool blue which almost seemed to sparkle like the waters of some lovely bottomless lake, and here and there, high, high in the arched blueness floated small clouds of snow-white fleece. The far-reaching world of the moor itself looked softly blue instead of gloomy purple-black or awful dreary gray. (36)

Overwhelmed with pleasure by the new, distinctly un-Indian sight, she calls out to Martha. The servant, who had told Mary on her first morning in Yorkshire that she would come to like the moor (16), is not surprised by the child's reaction and tells her spring is coming. When it does, Mary will find that "Yorkshire's th' sunniest place on earth" (37). The moor, she explains, will be covered with "gold-colored gorse blossoms an' the' blossoms o' th' broom, an' th' heather flowerin', all purple bells, an' hundreds o' butterflies flutterin' an' bees hummin' an' skylarks soaring up an' singing" (37). "You'll", she tells the child matter-of-factly, "want to get out on it at sunrise an' live out on it all day like Dickon does" (37).

When Mary asks “wistfully” if she “could ... ever get there” while gazing out at the moor, Martha tells her bluntly, “‘I don’t know’ ... ‘Tha’s never used tha’ legs since tha’ was born, it seems to me. Tha’ couldn’t walk five mile. It’s five mile to our cottage’” (37). Unlike before, when Martha’s blunt statements provoked Mary, she takes the criticism in stride, focusing instead on the prospect of visiting the cottage where Martha’s family lives so she can meet Mrs. Sowerby and Dickon, who, as I discuss later in this chapter, are strongly identified with the Yorkshire landscape and for whom Mary consequently feels a strong instinctual attraction. When she tells Martha that she likes her mother and brother, the servant appears to recognize the significance of Mary’s confession, looking “puzzled for a moment” and then “staring ... reflectively” at the younger child (37-38). As if her own opinion of Mary had changed over the course of the conversation and she realizes that she can help her, Martha somewhat rhetorically asks what “Dickon would think of” her. The question seems to fill Mary with loathing self-conscious, as she offers a solemn response: “‘He wouldn’t like me,’ said Mary in her stiff, cold little way. ‘No one does’” (38). Martha does not disagree with her, but asks in a curious, gentle tone if she likes herself. After thinking for a moment, Mary answers: “‘Not at all—really,’ ... ‘But I never thought of that before’” (38).

The conversation remains in Mary’s mind after Martha leaves to visit her family for the day. Knowing that Martha “was going to walk five miles across the moor to the cottage” where “she was going to help her mother with the washing and ... enjoy herself thoroughly” makes Mary feel lonelier than she ever has, but it also motivates her. She goes “out into the garden as quickly as possible” so she can work on building up her strength to walk across the moor. There, she runs around the fountain, counting ten laps “carefully” (38). When she finishes, she finds herself in “better spirits” (38). After a brief conversation with Ben about planting, the coming



springtime, and the locked garden that leaves her enlivened and curious, she walks around the garden, meditating on the changes she had started to notice in herself: “She had begun to like the garden just as she had begun to like the robin and Dickon and Martha’s mother. She was beginning to like Martha, too. That seemed a good many people to like—when you were not used to liking. She thought of the robin as one of the people” (39). This healthy reflection is interrupted when the robin reappears and, in the process of following him about, Mary finds the key to the locked garden, and, metaphorically, her happiness.

The prospect of having her *own* piece of Yorkshire garden where she can play thrills Mary. Burnett attributes this excitement directly to the environment’s nurturing, medicinal influence, which has corrected the deadening, corrosive effects India had on Mary’s mind, body, and spirit:

Living as it were, all by herself in a house with a hundred mysteriously closed rooms and having nothing whatever to do to amuse herself, had set her inactive brain to working and was actually awakening her imagination. There is no doubt that the fresh, strong, pure air from the moor had a great deal to do with it. Just as it had given her an appetite, and fighting with the wind had stirred her blood, so the same things had stirred her mind. In India she had always been too hot and languid and weak to care much about anything, but in this place she was beginning to care and to want to do new things. Already she felt less ‘contrary,’ though she did not know why. (41)

More than just an expression of childish curiosity, Mary’s desire to claim the garden comes from her newly recognized attachment to Misselthwaite. Consequently, when she finds, unlocks, and passes through the garden door the next morning, the moment is full of significant symbolic

meaning. She closes the door, “looking about her and breathing quite fast with excitement, and wonder, and delight. . . . [S]he felt as if she had found a world of her own” (46-47). Although feminist readings by Phillis Bixler, Shirley Foster and Judy Simons, and others have shown that Colin ultimately takes possession of the garden, Mary’s initial claim over it is a self-affirming act that asserts her desire to belong, helps her shed lingering feelings of alienation and displacement, and bonds her to Misselthwaite and England, thus helping her become English. As they talk about gardening later that day, she even tells Martha, ““I want to see all the things that grow in England”” (49). In a novel filled with subtle, slowly unfolding turning points wherein its central characters adopt new thoughts and habits that profoundly and positively affect their minds, bodies, and, consequently, their behavior and relationships, Mary’s entry into the garden is a singular, climactic moment. Symbolically, her passage into the womb-like enclosure of the garden marks the moment when Mary immerses herself in the nurturing natural world, becomes English, and her racial healing begins in earnest.

Stepping into the garden immediately triggers Mary’s own nurturing instinct, an important change in temperament that fills her with peace and later drives her to help Colin. Even though “she seems to be hundreds of miles away from any one”, she is not “lonely at all” (47). In fact, all she cares about is whether she can revive the untended, seemingly dead garden. Consequently, when she notices green shoots poking up among the dead plants, she acts by intuition and begins weeding. She becomes so peacefully absorbed in the pleasurable labor that “two or three” hours pass in a contented blur—“she had been actually happy all the time” (48). She reluctantly leaves the work to go inside for her lunch, vowing to come back later.

Even before she shares her secret with others, the garden helps Mary bond with Martha and Ben, both of whom are pleased by Mary’s improved behavior and physique. When she goes

inside after her first morning of work, Martha is delighted by the visible change she sees in her, attributing her “red cheeks”, “bright eyes”, and large appetite entirely to the skipping rope purchased by Mrs. Sowerby that Martha had given the child that morning: “‘Two pieces o’ meat an’ two helps o’ rice pudding!’ she said. ‘Eh! mother will be pleased when I tell her what the’ skippin’-rope’s done for thee’” (48). Martha also takes Mary’s new interest in gardening as a positive, yet natural, change. In fact, the child’s polite request for a garden of her own thrills Martha since, as she exclaims, her mother had said that Mary should have a plot to tend because the work would make her “happy” (50). As they begin plotting to get Mary a piece of land, to have Dickon bring her tools and seeds, and bring her to the cottage to meet Martha’s family, their relationship changes. They become friends. The peace Mary felt earlier in the garden stays with her, and she no longer feels lonely. Consequently, as the conversation peters out, the two sit “in comfortable quiet” (52).

Her relationship with Ben also improves. Eager to learn more about gardening, Mary begins to seek him out more and more frequently. Since she no longer speaks to him as she would a “native”, the gardener does not “object to her as strongly as he had at first” and is far more willing to converse (53). He teaches her more about plants, gardening, and the robin, but Ben also draws Mary’s attention to the physical changes in her body, which match the improvements in her character. Unlike before, when his frank assessment filled Mary with loathing self-awareness, his comments cause her to reflect on her improvement and endear him to her:

“Tha’s beginnin’ to do Misselthwaite credit,’ he said. ‘Tha’s a bit fatter than tha’ was an’ tha’s not quite so yellin’. Tha’ looked like a young plucked crow when

tha' first came into this garden. Thinks I to myself I never set eyes on an uglier, sourer faced young 'un."

...

"I know I'm fatter," she said. "My stockings are getting tighter. They used to make wrinkles." (54)

After their conversation, Mary realizes that she likes Ben; "she did like him. She always wanted to try to make him talk to her ... [and] she began to believe he knew everything in the world about flowers" (56). However, it also becomes clear that Mary, now cognizant of the changes in her mind and body, begins to like herself.

In the week after she discovers the garden, Mary works tirelessly in it. She was "determined" to bring it back to life and consequently "absorbed" by the work (53). Furthermore, "she was beginning to like to be out of doors" and growing stronger, which allowed her to run, skip, and dig for longer periods at a time (53). All of this makes her feel more "awake" with each passing day, and she begins to relish every moment spent outdoors (53). Almost as if she had shed her degenerate mind and body like Tom in *The Water-Babies*, at this point in the novel Mary becomes a new child, her weak, yellow, and racialized body replaced by a fat, energetic, and rosy-skinned one. She becomes English. And although she remains high-spirited, her contrary Indian temperament all but disappears, reemerging only in appropriate ways and at appropriate moments, such as later when she needs to quell Colin's hysterical tyranny. She recognizes, furthermore, that her improved wellbeing and self-worth stem entirely from the environment, her new lifestyle, and budding friendships. Indeed, the increasing descriptions of Mary's new feelings of contentment, security, and pleasurable interactions with her new friends

that appear after she finds the garden suggest that for the first time in her life she feels nurtured—by the place, the robin, Martha, Ben, and, by proxy, Mrs. Sowerby, whom Mary has still not met, but knows is not “like the mothers in India” (52).

Mrs. Sowerby is an idealized, romanticized mother who fills the maternal gaps left by Mrs. Lennox and Mrs. Craven. Although Mary and Colin do not meet her until the novel’s end, she is present throughout the narrative, functioning as a kind of earthy fairy godmother (Price calls her an “earth goddess” [8]) whose nurturing, healing care and wisdom reaches Mary and later Colin through Martha, Dickon, Ben, and even Mrs. Medlock and Mr. Craven, all of whom venerate and follow her maternal authority. Burnett emphasizes that her wisdom stems entirely from maternal instinct, experience, and her intimate relationship with nature, of which she appears to be an extension. Mrs. Sowerby thus fits into the long, often related traditions that idealize mothers and link or even equate women with nature. She is a key part of Burnett’s pastoral, as much a part of the place’s salubrious ecology as the moor that sends healing winds to Mary. Her twelve children may often be hungry, but they are never unloved, and she lets them “tumble about on th’ moor an’ play there all day” (19), growing vigorous and good-spirited in nature. Consequently, she also provides one of the novel’s central lessons: children need to be immersed in healthful natural environments to become strong in mind and body; in other words, they need a natural education and someone who will guide them to it. Mary learns this, of course, by witnessing her own garden-made transformation and through Martha and Dickon, who later help her apply it in their rehabilitation of Colin.

This point and Mrs. Sowerby’s influence shine through clearly when Mary meets Mr. Craven for the first time and she pleads with him to let her “play out of doors” and “have a bit of earth” to garden instead of having a governess who she fears would keep her indoors (69, 70).

Mary is nervous about arguing with Mr. Craven, but when he tells her Mrs. Sowerby had advised him that Mary “had better get stronger before [she] had a governess”, she musters up “a scrap of courage” to tell him what she wants and knows she needs. ““I never liked it India””, she explains. ““It makes me hungry here, and I am getting fatter.’ ... [and] ‘It makes me feel strong when I play and the wind comes over the moor”” (69). Mary’s emotional argument and her still-scrawny appearance convinces Mr. Craven that Mrs. Sowerby’s prescription of “fresh air and freedom and running about” is exactly what Mary needs (70). Consequently, he tells Mary she can have “as much earth” as she likes and Mrs. Medlock that ““now I have seen the child I understand what Mrs. Sowerby meant. She must be less delicate before she begins lessons. Give her simple, healthy food. Let her run wild in the garden. Don’t look after her too much. She needs liberty and fresh air and romping about. Mrs. Sowerby is to come and see her now and then and she may sometimes go to the cottage”” (70-71). Of course, Mary is delighted by his decision since it frees her to restore the neglected garden with Dickon (whom she has just met), a process he promised will teach her about plants and animals, make her “fat” and “hungry as a young fox”, and bring them “a lot o’ fun” (63).

Like Martha, Dickon testifies to the efficacy of Mrs. Sowerby’s childrearing philosophy and brings her wisdom to Mary and Colin. He is a romanticized character who takes on almost mythical proportions in the text—Price calls him a “Pan figure” (8). After Mary meets him for the first time, she thinks he is too good to be real; “was he—was he—only a wood fairy?” she thinks after he is gone (71). The opposite of both Mary and Colin, Dickon serves as a foil for both, highlighting their degeneracy and what they should and can be. He is the quintessentially healthy child of nature who comes from and belongs to the Yorkshire environment as much as the wild animals he befriends. Because Dickon spends his days on the moor, he is sturdy, strong,

and, as he tells Mary, so “tough” that he has never been ill even though he stays out to “sniff an’ sniff” the plants as they grow during rain showers: ““I never ketched cold since I was born. I wasn’t brought up nesh [delicate] enough. I’ve chased about th’ moor in all weathers same as th’ rabbits does. Mother says I’ve sniffed up too much fresh air for twelve year’ to ever get to sniffin’ with cold. I’m as tough as a white-thorn knobstick”” (63). Furthermore, he is pure, unspoiled by coddling and too much formal education—in fact, Dickon is nearly illiterate, which the novel treats as inconsequential because he is healthy, kind, and fluent in wholesome living and the care of plants and animals. Partly because of his mother’s teaching and partly because he spends every day outside, Dickon knows the moor’s characteristics and rhythms through and through, can communicate with animals as well as people, and understands that nature is good for the body, mind, and soul. In the novel’s pastoral logic, this is all he needs.

Dickon thus exists to impart that knowledge to the upper-class children and to help heal them. Mary needs Dickon’s “real expertise, knowledge, and labor” to restore the garden, to continue her own improvement, and to help her rehabilitate Colin (Price 8). He becomes a friend to both, which of course they need, but he also serves as model and teacher for them, showing them what health and happiness looks like and how to acquire it. Even before they meet, Martha’s stories about her brother cause Mary’s imagination to run wild, and she longs to know and be like the good-hearted boy who enjoys Mrs. Sowerby’s love, spends his days outside on the moor, and can speak to animals.

Consequently, when they do meet, Mary is in awe of Dickon and yearns for his validation and acceptance, which, in a sign of how much she has already improved, he readily gives. For example, when she first invites him into her garden, Dickon marvels at her instinctual knack for gardening and the work she has already done, which fills Mary with pride, and he responds

affirmatively when she tells him the work was making her “fatter,” “stronger,” and “less tired” (62-63). “‘It’s rare good for thee,’” he says (63). Most importantly, he tells her he likes her when she asks (65). Dickon’s approval calms Mary’s earlier fear that he would dislike her and proves to her that she is no longer the contrary, lonely child she was when she arrived and that she will only get better. Although he is not her first friend, Dickon is the first who is a child and she can play and share secrets with.

On their first morning together, Dickon also teaches Mary generosity, the value of helping others, and how to work collaboratively, lessons she would not have been able to learn without him and which prepare her to undertake the task of rehabilitating Colin. Unlike Martha and Ben, who are tied to their work, Dickon is unburdened by adult responsibilities and thus free to devote his attention entirely to Mary and the garden, the restoration of which he tells her will be “th’ best fun” he has ever had (63). Mary, in turn, is pleasurably overwhelmed by his kindness and generosity, eventually adopting the characteristics herself. As they bond over their mutual excitement and work side-by-side, Mary relishes in the pleasure of his companionship, their shared secret, and earnest, collaborative labor. Indeed, as she leaves him to go inside for lunch, it becomes clear that she has completed her transformation—she is no longer the degenerate child from India, but a kind, lovely, and healthy English girl (66). Consequently, she can turn her attention away from herself and to Colin, who she helps become strong and kind in the second half of the novel.



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