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Symposium Paper

The New and Outspoken *She*

Ayesha and Ustane are two strong female characters in Henry Rider Haggard's *She*. Ayesha is the matriarch of the Amahagger tribe as well as a cruel disciplinarian. One part of her authority is the fact she has intentionally bred her attendants to be beautiful, but mute. Richard Soloway theorizes that "the emergence of the woman's movement in general and the so-called New Woman in particular coincided with the emergence of eugenics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (541). While the New Woman term did not exist before the early to mid-1890s, literature had been foreshadowing the emergence of this figure since at least the 1880s. Haggard, whether knowingly or not, incorporates the manipulation of eugenics into Ayesha's character; therefore, her level of authority adds to her personification of the Proto-New Woman. On the other hand, Ustane is a strong-willed yet beautifully masculine woman who defies Ayesha in the name of love. Both women are personifications of what would later be called the New Woman identity, though they are not presented in a favorable light. According to Andrzej Diniejko's article on *The Victorian Web*, the New Woman is "intelligent, educated, emancipated, independent and self-supporting" (Diniejko). The rise of the figure caused much unrest amongst English society, and Haggard seems to be pulling on that disturbance while creating his characters. While both Ayesha and Ustane embody various aspects of the Proto-New Woman, their deaths convey hope that the identity would eventually die out. Indeed, the majority

of Late-Victorian society hoped that the New Woman would, in essence, be a short lived phase and then disappear.

The personifications shown in *She* involves both the Proto-New Woman as she would be and is viewed in society, as well as the implied potential fate of the identity according to Haggard's character portrayal in *She*. Character depiction is important when analyzing both the impact and anxieties of the Proto-New Woman identity in relation to the late nineteenth century. Europe was not the only nation that saw a new version of feminism. Sharon Crozier-De Rosa speaks about the impact of the New Woman on imperialism, she speculates "[The] definition of the 'new' woman or New Woman was not simply pertinent to women in England, but rather to women in the British colonies as well" (420). The men travel from England to Africa on their journey, and there is where they encounter the two 'other' women. Through their interactions with Leo, and in some cases Holly, Ustane and Ayesha depict two slightly different images of the Proto-New Woman and society's expectations of the behavior that would be included. Through Ayesha and Ustane, Haggard suggests that the empowered female image is present, but it will not last. Ustane displays how a woman's desire to have a voice in the world will ultimately be her downfall; while Ayesha represents the sensual supremacy women can and do wield, in addition to the destructive outcome if they acquire a wide range of power and authority.

Before readers are familiar with *She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed*, the first major female character is introduced. Ustane is a native Amahagger woman who kisses Leo to claim him as her husband when he first arrives in the tribe's village. Leo is first shocked at the action, but is quick to adapt and returns the embrace. While Ustane's actions are considered normal in regard to her tribe's customs, her conduct is forward and bold to the Englishmen who are accustomed to very different gender performances. Mark Doyle theorizes that "unlike the godlike Ayesha, the

mortal Ustane shows her feminine potency through courage and constancy” (Doyle). In *She*, Ustane is described as a handsome woman who has dark to light brown hair (93). Earlier in the novel, the women of England were described as “pretty” (36). Now, the description comparison between Ustane and Victorian women shows the differentiation between her and the rest of female society in the novel. Ustane is not only non-white, which during the late nineteenth century is in itself a reason to distinguish her as Other, but she is also brave and bold. She does what she likes, rarely obeys orders, and stands against Ayesha later on. Almost all of Ustane’s characteristics and manners place her as a representation of the future New Woman role. Richard Reeve articulates Haggard’s knowledge of the New Woman figure after it is named, “There can be little doubt that Haggard was aware both of its popularity and profitability, and he explored the genre in parts of his fiction” (155). Indeed, Haggard must have known of the importance of the rising feminine portrayal even before the catch phrase was coined. The level of resemblance between the two main female characters in *She* and the forthcoming New Woman is undeniable.

However, Ustane’s position of power is short-lived once they leave the tribe and venture to She’s location. Ustane is vigilant about watching over Leo while he is sick, and she refuses to leave him for any reason. Even under the threat of death from She, Ustane stands her ground for the man she loves. Haggard uses Ustane to show the assumed issue of a woman who pushes against authority. Ustane’s verbal defiance gives credit to her love for Leo, but also her ability to see how death would be her fate for choosing him; indeed, the young tribeswoman voices many things that causes Ayesha to be angered with her (Haggard 210). This open act of verbal defiance is something society, mainly the men, fear from the New Woman. Women might not always spout about love, but the very action of speaking freely is enough to cause unrest. Sadly, Ustane is not allowed to live after defying Ayesha once again. Doyle illustrates that “after Ustane

bolsters Vincey's masculinity, her demise is anticlimactic; Haggard simply discards her character after Ayesha appears on the scene" (Doyle). Leo does defend Ustane against Ayesha at first, but She simply eliminates the competition without remorse. The death of Ustane is symbolic of the imminent death of the outspoken New Woman identity. Leo is outraged by the murder, and threatens Ayesha while she is still garbed. However, all of his anger and hatred vanishes at the sight of She's physical appearance. Her beauty alone is enough to capture his attention and pull him away from the tragedy of Ustane's symbolic death.

Angelique Richardson explores the discussion of eugenics and the New Woman in her book *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman*. Richardson states that "sex and society were biologically determined, but that change might be induced through biological rather than social means" (35). During the late nineteenth century, there were various concerns about women's roles changing and how it was going to impact society. One concern Richardson addresses is how feminism reflected negative possibilities for traditional social reproductive structures. Soloway offers criticism of Richardson's research in stating:

Unlike the archetypical New Woman, who sought equality with men and often denied that woman's role was biologically determined for marriage and motherhood, the eugenic feminists who figure in Richardson's study accepted this biological imperative. But while they emphasized that men and women were innately different, they insisted that this provided their sex a unique and critical opportunity through "rational reproduction" to breed a new and healthy race (542).

Haggard plays on this concept with Ayesha's habit of breeding her servants with the goal of creating beautiful, yet mute and dumb, attendants. Ayesha admits "I bred them so — it hath taken many centuries and much trouble, but at last I have succeeded" (Haggard 152). While Ayesha is a fictional character, Haggard uses her to convey the reality of selective reproduction. Not only would it take a considerable amount of time to achieve, but when read in a fictional adventure novel, the idea is not pleasing. Furthermore, the controlling of reproduction shows a level of power over people that most fear. The control she exerts over the tribe is an additional attribute most feared from the growing identity of the Proto-New Woman. Indeed, the Amahagger fear She because of her power and abilities. It does not appear that all of the tribespeople know of her attendants and how they came to be, but it is still clear they fear her more than anything. According to Madhudaya Sinha, "Ayesha proves to be knowledgeable about a bewildering mix of ideas garnered from a range of far-reaching subjects, including chemistry, astronomy and philosophy" (30). Ayesha's vast amount of knowledge is one of the first features that points towards the Proto-New Woman role. Indeed, her knowledge could be from centuries of life, but because she seeks to gain more from Holly proves she enjoys learning. Victorian women were not ignorant, but they were not educated in the same way men were. Women were supposed to maintain and manage the house, which has nothing to do with topics previously described by Sinha. It can be said that "Ayesha violates Victorian gender expectations and the natural evolutionary order by her power and immortality" (Doyle). By going against Victorian gender expectations of women, she embodies the Proto-New Woman. Ayesha is intelligent, commanding, holds immense power over men, and is a cruel ruler. Holly and Leo both fall prey to her beauty, which displays a sense of sensual power that women supposedly hold. Holly and Leo become especially fearful when Ayesha expresses she intends to return with them to

England. Her flippant speech of overthrowing royalty and taking down tyrants cause them both to dread what such a woman could do to the world (Haggard 231-233). Surely, not all men feared the rise of powerful women, but most considered the prospect to be potentially detrimental. Haggard addresses issues in *She* that were prevalent during the end of the nineteenth century, as well as the causes for such upheaval. The addition of the Englishmen to the story also serves as a comparison of cultural comprehension and brings attention to the women's differences to European society.

Leo Vincey is a young and overwhelmingly attractive man in Haggard's adventure novel. He is the only reason the three men (Leo, Holly, and Job) leave England to travel to Africa in search of an assumed myth. Horace Holly is Leo's guardian; Leo's father had died when he was a child, and left Holly as Leo's protector. Job is a man servant Holly hired shortly after acquiring custody of Leo. Once they are in the presence of the Amahagger tribe, Leo is instantly claimed by Ustane. Unbeknownst to them all, Leo would find himself in the middle of a life-altering love triangle with Ustane and Ayesha. Doyle imagines "the sources of these women's potency also create ambivalence about Vincey because Ustane's relationship validates and humanizes him, while Ayesha's relationship diminishes and caricatures him" (Doyle). It is through the way the women see him, interact with him, as well as their respective representation of the Proto-New Woman that dictate Leo's place within the narrative once in Africa. The women impact his evolution as a person. Ustane loves him for the beauty he possesses and later his personality. He is not cruel towards her, even though he is hesitant to acknowledge her new role as his wife due to cultural differences. Ayesha, on the other hand, is a completely different obstacle for Leo. While Ustane is simply described as a handsome woman, there is nothing overtly sinister in her appearance or manner. The main flaw in Ustane's personality, at least by late nineteenth century

standards, is that she is outspoken and more sexually liberal than Victorian women. Leo does not seem bothered by this characteristic, though Job and Holly find it disconcerting at times. In contrast to Ustane, Ayesha is a completely different matter altogether. When Holly first glimpses Ayesha, he describes her with explicit details that create an image of a woman who is not entirely angelic. He uses “serpent-like grace,” “awful loveliness,” “*evil*,” and “the glory was not all of heaven” (Haggard 153). It is these same features that ensnare Leo in the same fashion as Holly. Reeve notices that “Haggard’s romances have led to his frequent characterization as a writer primarily concerned with depicting eternal feminine figures and their searing and irresistible impact upon helpless males” (154). The imagery given to describe She gives evidence to Victorian society’s underlying assumptions of the Proto-New Woman figure: behind the beauty is an evil temptress who lies in wait to destroy the social and political norms of civilization. By depicting Ayesha in such a fashion, Haggard over emphasizes most of the typical fears associated with the rise of the Proto-New Woman. A woman that could wield power over people, whether physical or through intimidation, along with possessing the intellect to stand equal with educated men.

The idea of the Proto-New Woman, and later the New Woman identity, has elicited various reactions from society, and not all of them positive. The coincidence of the New Woman figure appearing around the same time as the concept of feminine eugenics has also added to the uncertainty of change. Haggard addresses the social anxiety through his two main female characters in *She*: Ayesha and Ustane. Not only does Ayesha control the reproduction and biological outcome of her servants, but the tribespeople also have ways of maintaining control over their own culture. The beginning of the novel gives a brief but thorough introduction to the

European culture's view of women and their appropriate roles. The Amahagger offer one of many scenarios of non-European outlook on the role of women. According to Barri J. Gold:

The equality that women supposedly enjoy among the Amahagger does not prevent their periodic and systematic elimination. When the women become "unbearable" the men rise and kill off the old as a warning to the young. This practice suggests that women become dispensable among the Amahagger when they are beyond the age of giving birth, when they become "unbearable" (310).

This aspect of controlling population and reproduction is both similar and opposite to Ayesha's controlled breeding with her servants. Ayesha wishes for perfection in everything, including the perfect servants, and she is willing to breed humans in such a way to achieve her goal. The men of the Amahagger tribe maintain control over the people by openly exterminating women that are no longer able to bear children. By showing this deeper connection with eugenics, Gold offers an insight into why the tribe takes action against their women. While the tribeswomen have power, it is only allowed by the men as long as procreation is possible. The act of murdering the older generation of women serves a two-fold purpose: it illuminates mouths to feed who cannot be productive to the growth of the tribe, and it shows the younger women that male influence is still in place. Eugenics is not the only issue associated with the rise of feminism in the late nineteenth century, but it is included as a disconcerting aspect. Women might hold power, but in the case of the Amahagger tribe, the power is allowed and regulated by the men.

Between the tribe's behavior, specifically Ustane's, and then that of Ayesha, the Proto-New Woman identity is analyzed and the expectations of its longevity can be determined. While Ustane's character is favorable and overall good, her compulsion to speak freely is what sentences her to death. Male society, and some feminine, in the late nineteenth century feared

women gaining a voice. Many were concerned that it would go against the balance of things, and in turn cause destruction of civilized society. Ayesha is physically more pleasing to Victorian notions, but her power and influence is where she entices unease and horror. Her vast knowledge, power over men and reproduction, and her unforgiving nature stir dread and fear in the Englishmen present. While in her presence, Leo and Holly admire, love, and worship Ayesha, but when away from her they understand the horrible situation they are in. Haggard's depiction of the Proto-New Woman through these two women is a reflection of society's fear in the late nineteenth century. Women were gaining power, a voice, and starting to place themselves on the same level as men. Corresponding elements in *She* allow for hypothetical outcomes to be explored in regard to the growing image of feminine power. Ustane dies as a result of her opinionated nature; and despite Ayesha's goddess-like appearance, she does not survive to wreak havoc on the world as she had promised. Through Haggard's adventure novel, the hope for the downfall of the future New Woman is clear as well as aspirations for a victorious patriarchal society.

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