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The Jewel of Seven Stars - Bram Stoker

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The Jewel of Seven Stars

Bram Stoker's *The Jewel of Seven Stars* is something of a literary conundrum. First published in 1903, it left readers and critics confused by its ending; republished in 1912, the novel had a different, more straightforward but less interesting ending. Critics remain unclear as to whether Stoker himself rewrote the ending, although William Hughes suggests that, in 1908, Stoker wrote a refutation against censorship by publishers; therefore, any alteration is more likely to have been made by Stoker's hand. This uncertainty adds to the intrigue of the novel.

This work adds an interesting progression to Stoker's previous writing, the most notable of which is *Dracula*, in that it continues in the gothic horror genre, specifically 'imperial gothic'; it examines how scientific progress impacts religious beliefs; and it critically considers the aspect of the 'New Woman' within society. In looking at Stoker's other works in conjunction with *Dracula*, critics have been able to draw a more holistic picture of a writer with a real interest in politics and detailed knowledge in esoteric subjects. Much is made of Stoker's references to real Egyptologists and figures within the political landscape within *The Jewel of Seven Stars*. He borrowed the plot from Sir William Wilde, who brought a mummy back from Egypt, and was a keen student of Wallis Budge, the Keeper of Egyptian and Assyrian antiquities at the British Museum. Stoker also utilised the work of John Greaves, Flinders Petrie, Champollion and others, lending its plot a carefully researched veracity (Senf, 2010, p.101).

In focusing so heavily upon his theme of Egypt and incorporating such accurate detail, it could be suggested that Stoker's novel is an example of the subgenre of 'Mummy fiction' and draws from the problematic British occupation of Egypt as its root inspiration. The unofficial occupation – making Egypt a 'veiled Protectorate' – endured from 1882-1914 but had repercussions both before and after. This occupation centred around the British anxiety that hostile control of the Suez Canal would lead to the rapid and incontrovertible decline of the British empire by cutting off its trade routes. Ailise Bulfin suggests that this led to 'imperial paranoia' (2011) and thus fiction writers imagined the "vengeful, supernatural Egyptian forces" working against the "civilised, rational" (2011, p.412) aspect of England. As Bulfin notes, the comments of General Wolsey's staff officer illustrated that Egypt had been no stranger to occupation by empires, and had frequently played a strange part in their destiny (2011, p.414). The 'Egypt Question' haunted both Great Britain and, from the 1860s, its gothic fiction, in which writers could explore the employment of ancient curses and "retributive invasion" (Bulfin, 2011, p.417), persisting even into the early twentieth century, the period for Stoker's novel.

In brief, the plot of the novel centres around a combination of romance and adventure; like *Dracula*, it also contains different narrative voices. A young lawyer, Malcolm Ross, is enamoured of Margaret Trelawny, a young woman only recently reacquainted with her collector father, Abel. Mr Trelawny is an Egyptologist and has been for many years amassing a large collection of artefacts. His most precious are relics – including the mummy and detached, seven-digit hand – of Queen Tera, and he was in Egypt collecting these relics when Margaret was born. He notes the likeness between Margaret and the Egyptian queen, which foreshadows the influence upon Margaret by Tera as the novel progresses: a fact which does not seem to concern Trelawny but perturbs Ross greatly as Margaret's character alters.

Ross and Margaret are thrown together more intimately when her father is incapacitated, rendered unconscious, and it is this event which starts the novel as Margaret appeals to Ross for assistance. It

becomes clear that Trelawny's coma and vicious injuries have a supernatural origin due to the match of 7 claw marks, attributed to Tera's seven-clawed cat. It is surmised that this attack has been initiated by Queen Tera's essence upon Trelawny's acquisition of lamps vital to her resurrection. A visit from Trelawny's partner, Eugene Corbeck, reveals Trelawny's project of Tera's resurrection, and a book by Nicholas von Huyn, a fictional Dutch explorer, reports the history of Tera; these two narrative devices fill in the necessary gaps of understanding for the reader and highlight Trelawny's purpose. The group – comprising Ross, Margaret, Trelawny, Corbeck and Doctor Winchester, who has been advising on Mr Trelawny's condition – relocate to Trelawny's Cornish pseudo-castle, with a subterranean cave in which the resurrection is attempted.   The 1903 ending sees the project to combine ancient mysteries with modern scientific knowledge result in huge and fatal failure. All die, apart from Ross, and Tera's mummified corpse is nowhere to be seen. The 1912 ending also sees the resurrection as an apparent failure but all survive and Ross marries Margaret. The possibility of Tera possessing Margaret is intimated but never fully clarified.

As an example of 'imperial Gothic', the novel share similarities with Stoker's better-known *Dracula* and combines scientific ideology with a seemingly contradictory interest in the supernatural. This mode of Gothic features especially a fear of invasion "in the form of demonic powers from the past" (Brantlinger, 1985, p.245). Thus it explores the theme of science and progress, the danger that might arise from such progress versus its ability to vanquish danger from ancient realms, and the barbarism that might return – such as the reader might recognise from *Dracula*. Thus, according to Brantlinger, it addresses the potential breakdown of organised religion in the face of the impact of scientific progression, and the rise of interest in occultism can be seen as an "emergent pseudo-religion" (1985, p. 246), perhaps replacing conventional monotheism. More importantly, however, imperial gothic reflects the fear of regression of the British race and the decline of the British empire, to which the Egypt Question no doubt contributed. Roger Luckhurst suggests that fiction of this time focusing upon Egypt could be termed 'Egyptian Gothic', which drew not just on the politics of the time but also on the emerging academic study of Egyptology (2006, p.123). There was increased interest in travel to Egypt as a tourist destination - Thomas Cook's package tours revolutionised tourism there (Fritze, 2016, p.194). Egypt inspired travel narratives as a genre (Fritze, 2016, p.195), as well as creating a market for art works depicting ruins and monuments (Fritze, 2016, p.197) and was considered a safe place by women travellers and settlers, with its ancient culture and mythology inspiring a cornucopia of fiction writers. This focus would have spoken to the reading public, as well as enabling writers to respond to the exoticism of a country whose topography was known, whose ancient customs were being explored, and whose politically charged situation rendered as much character as any other within their fiction.

What is particularly interesting within much of the fiction of this 'mummy fiction' genre, and of Stoker's novel in particular, is the use of a beautiful female mummy, and its link to a romantic but ultimately doomed love plot. Bulfin argues that plots tended either towards curse tales or romance plots, and that curse tales were, by far, the most popular (2011, p.420); however, it is also suggested that the romance plots carry elements of curse, particularly when the female mummy is associated with a threat against the romantic object. Such is the case in *The Jewel of Seven Stars*. The discovery of Tera's tomb references the real-life Urabi revolt, contains many references to hostile modern Egyptians, and suggests, contrary to many travellers' experiences, that Egypt was not a safe place for the English (Bulfin, 2011, p.431). Bulfin suggests that Stoker writes in contradiction to other romance narratives by placing the mummy at the centre of the love plot in order to highlight the unruliness and danger that modern Egypt represented, through embodying its history into the figure of Queen Tera. Tera represents an object "which cannot be tamed" (Dobson, 2007, p.19) – the focus upon Tera's hand lends itself to the fairy tale trope, and to the marriageability of the

mummy. This is reiterated through the novel, and particularly highlighted by Margaret's intuition that Tera's mummy is clad in a marriage robe (235). The alternate endings have different perspectives here but the 1912 ending particularly contains a hint at a successful union for Tera, if awakening to a marriage was her intention. This could, however, also contain a veiled threat for Britain if other literary examples of marriageable mummies are taken into account (Dobson, 2017, p.28). This idea is supported by the suggestion that Egyptian mummy hands "pointed to the uncanny aspects of Eastern craftsmanship, as it combined beauty with horror and perilously conflated nonhuman artefacts with human labour" (Briefel, 2008, p.264). Tera is both a commodity and a collectible. Her vengefulness earlier in the novel suggests that she would not quietly acquiesce to being 'collected' into a quiet English marriage.

Another aspect of this genre, one which is also problematic, Bradley Deane suggests, is that of anachronistic time (2008, p.384). The mummy fictions that contain a romance plot, which includes Stoker's, are focused around the problem of time, and "repetition and doubling [which] offer no advance" (Deane, 2008, p. 384). This is shown by the haunting similarity of Margaret to Tera – whose name even contains Tera's, reversed, in its last four letters (Byron, 2007, p.61) – and the distancing of Margaret's personality as the novel progresses. Ross notices that she is becoming more agitated and imperious, and this leads him to express a desire to have Margaret return to her former state: "I never know whether the personality present was my Margaret – the old Margaret whom I had loved at first glance – or the other new Margaret, whom I hardly understood and whose intellectual aloofness made an implacable barrier between us" (176). For Abel Trelawny, Margaret's father, it would appear that his fascination in Tera is an example of where "sexual and scholarly desires merge" (Deane, 2008, p.386), and the unwrapping of Tera's mummy to nakedness – observed, not entirely unerotically, by four men – contains the pleasure of the "endless striptease" (Deane, 2008, p.389). Tera is objectified, she becomes a commodity but also a sexual object, and Stoker's description of her likens her to "a statue carven in ivory by the hand of Praxiteles" (235), referencing the first life-size statue of the female nude, the Aphrodite of Knidos. Tera is here "very much a static male fantasy of female beauty" (Dobson, 2017, p.26). In resembling her, Margaret becomes a more problematic proposition to Ross. Here, the differences between the two different endings become key. The 1903 ending suggests a "particularly Egyptian timelessness" (Deane, 2008, p.394), an unchanging, surviving, primitive power of an ancient civilisation. Tera's physical dissipation from Ross's arms as he carries a body he believes to be Margaret out of the subterranean cavern signals the immunity to science and progress of barbarian, ancient knowledge. Indeed, the prevalence of the theme of reincarnation in mummy fiction speaks to a British desire for "immunity to historical change" (Deane, 2008, p.402); reincarnation renders time anachronistic, cyclical, non-linear – which connotes a different view of 'progress', one in which knowledge does not continue to advance to a vanishing point. However, this novel – "the darkest mummy story of the occupation period" – also contains possibly "the most stunningly abrupt and inconclusive ending in Victorian fiction" (Deane, 2008, p.404).

Certainly the 1903 ending is inconclusive. It leaves unanswered the questions of whether, in fact, Tera's resurrection was successful, and if the combination of ancient power with modern science would really result in such catastrophe but, it could be argued, this ending is not so abrupt and unsatisfying as the 1912 ending. The happier, more ordered, ending of Ross and Margaret's wedding perhaps signals the imminent end to the veiled protectorate and reflects the politics of the time. The ending can, however, also be interpreted in a less tidy fashion. Glennis Byron suggests that, rather than a negative view of science failing to resurrect the dead queen, science actually works to release the transgressive and the monstrous (2007, p.57). Margaret could be considered to embody the essence of Queen Tera as the novel has thus far intimated, or alternatively that

Margaret has been "comprehensively replaced" (Byron, 2007, p.60) by Tera, albeit that Stoker performs this replacement by stealth. It is this ambiguity which is, for critics, the intriguing aspect of this otherwise rather simplistic alternate ending.

Critics have further suggested ways in which the aspect of romance within the novel can be further complicated, focusing specifically upon reading the novel as an example of 'Female Gothic', which is characterised particularly by themes such as motherhood and constructions of gender, and explored through structural features such as absent mothers and models of desire (Smith, 2004, p.80). Andrew Smith suggests that Female Gothic is predicated on the denial of love (2004, p.81) and that *The Jewel of Seven Stars* gives an "anxious male reading" of the Female Gothic, in which love could be considered as a model of pathology (2004, p.81). Tera might be considered as Margaret's absent mother, or to be returning in a surrogate function; however, the main way in which the narrative unfolds is through the character of Ross misreading the narrative as one of love of Margaret but is, in fact, one of terror with Tera in control (2004, p.81-2). Smith draws correlations to *Dracula*; Tera is a "Gothic monster" (2004, p.84) and, like Dracula, is trying to use the group to accomplish her resurrection. However, the true horror lies in Ross's inability to properly 'see' the character of Margaret, and "the idea that women cannot be properly objectified: that they are not as they appear to be" (Smith, 2004, p.86). Smith is one critic who suggests that the 1912 ending is Stoker's suggestion that social control can be exerted through marriage, and that the novel itself represents a horror of women's empowerment (2004, p.88). No doubt the reader can also identify Margaret with Mina Harker in *Dracula*, in their shared ability to commune with and exert some kind of control over the ancient power, as reciprocal as that control must be. Smith's reading gives a pessimistic and negative view of Stoker's writing on the role of female characters; no doubt a complicated topic, the rendering of such characters bears further study and consideration outside of the remit of this article.

Despite being one of Stoker's lesser known works, *The Jewel of Seven Stars* has inspired several film adaptations, most notably Hammer Studio's 1971 adaptation *Blood from the Mummy's Tomb* and has much to recommend it in terms of the variety of critical interpretations that have been drawn. The alternative endings and their associated ambiguities enable the reader, and scholar, to consider the many influences playing upon Stoker as he envisaged his novel, as well as contemplating how those influences then contributed to its alteration.

Word count: 2,462

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