“Heroic Hearts”: Masculinity and Imperialism in “Ulysses” and “The White Man’s Burden”

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Abstract

This essay aims to uncover how Victorian poetry aided in the construction of a hegemonic masculinity that is ruthless, adversarial, and deemed integral to the success of British imperial work. In promoting this new paradigm, Victorian writers aimed to appeal to men’s egos and spirits, albeit in differing ways: Alfred Tennyson’s “Ulysses” (1842) professes that embodying a masculine—and therefore colonial—role serves to support personal fulfilment, while Rudyard Kipling’s “The White Man’s Burden” (1899) claims that the purpose of adopting such a role lies in the prosperity it brings humanity as a whole. Together, Tennyson and Kipling exemplify not only the fluidity and volatility of Victorian gender roles but showcase the ways in which masculinity became bound to tenets of violence, individuality, and to British colonialism.

Keywords: Victorian poetry; Tennyson; Kipling; imperialism; masculinity

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British historian Andrew S. Thompson wrote in 1997 that in colonial Britain, the terms "empire" and "imperialism" were "like empty boxes that were continuously being filled up and emptied of their meanings" (p.147). These meanings—doubtlessly influenced by changing cultural discourse and stiffening social roles—were anything but fixed, and in this paper, I will argue that two Victorian poems suggest the inauguration of a new hegemonic masculinity that may have been significant with regards to the growth of imperialistic desire and the ruthlessness deemed necessary for colonial success. In selecting "Ulysses" (a mythological dramatic monologue published in 1842) and "The White Man's Burden" (a political poem grounded in material reality published in 1899) to support my analysis, I hope to explore the ways in which these constructions of masculinity pervade all aspects of Victorian social life—from fantasy and entertainment to tangible and grounded foreign policy debate. Both widely read and popular at the end of the nineteenth century, these two poems ground and typify the discourse surrounding gender roles and empire within the late Victorian period. Beginning by locating an individualistic masculine prototype (a "New Man") and a calm, feminized beta male within Tennyson's work, this essay will then situate these contrasting constructions of masculinity within Kipling's discussion of Britain's imperial obligation, and finally discuss the discrepancies in the morality and societal worth allocated to "masculine" individualism and aggression as suggested by the texts. In promoting an ideal of masculinity that is both restless and aggressive, Alfred Tennyson's "Ulysses" and Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden" manipulate manhood to equate masculinity with imperialist work, serving to secure men's place in the public sphere while confining women—and feminine men—to the private one. This being said, these two poems differ in the societal value they allocate to this work and to the fulfilment of masculine gender roles: Kipling believes that its importance lies in the (alleged) prosperity it brings humanity, while Tennyson believes that it lies in personal fulfilment. In analyzing the ways in which definitions of conventional masculinity and imperialism sharpened and grew intertwined throughout the Victorian era, we can historically and literarily ground the conventions of hegemonic masculinity and idealized femininity that continue to plague western society today.

In "Ulysses"—released in 1842 and chronicling the despondency and discontent that protagonist Ulysses experiences upon his return to his hometown Ithaca—Tennyson's speaker draws on his own life experiences to equate femininity with mundane and monotonous labour in the domestic sphere, simultaneously equating masculinity with work that is thrilling, dramatic, and performed in the spotlight for all to see (Hughes, 1979). The poem begins as the speaker attempts to separate himself from any effeminate qualities, asserting that to possess them would be a detriment to his happiness and personal pleasure. The opening lines,

> It little profits that an idle king
> By this still hearth, among these barren crags
> Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole
> Unequal laws unto a savage race (Tennyson 1842, lines 1–4)

make this intent clear: Searching for success and prestige on a more grand and glorious scale, Ulysses finds homebound labour dull and unfulfilling for a "hungry [heart]" such as his (Tennyson,

1842, line 12). This type of "idle" labour—labour that was often depicted as globally insignificant and small in scale—such as chores, child-rearing, and providing overall care for local communities—was often marketed towards women via conduct books such as Sara Stickney Ellis's *The Women of England* and Samuel Beeton's *Complete Etiquette for Ladies*, and, though Ulysses doesn't necessarily diminish this work's importance, he make it clear that for "souls that have toiled," for men who have "moved heaven and earth," it simply isn't rewarding (Tennyson, 1842, line 46, 67). Literature scholar Lynn O'brien writes that in "the patriarchal world of Ithaca and Victorian England, heroism was defined according to what one does, not based on who one is" (1994, p. 177), further confirming the understood importance of a dynamic, active lifestyle and aiding in explaining Ulysses's rejection of his wife's assumed idleness. Furthermore, Ulysses reveals his aversion to domestic life by lamenting the routine he would adopt if he chose to remain in Ithaca with his "aged" wife instead of spending his life travelling and conquering new lands (Tennyson, 1842, line 3). In doing so, he reveals his most pressing fear: that he will grow old and become haunted by feelings of failure and disappointment after having left his greatest goals, passions, and yearnings unrealized. From the way he discusses domesticity, we can come to understand that Ulysses's attitude towards domestic work is not that it is useless, but rather that it is not suited for an impassioned and tempestuous man such as himself.

The hungry, restless, and aggressive masculine ideal depicted in "Ulysses" was, for Victorians, a relatively new construction. Victorian scholar Bradley Deane calls the archetype of late Victorian masculinity the "New Man," referencing the cultural shift that replaced the "entrepreneur, the missionary, and the affectionate family man" as the idealized versions of manhood with the "untamed frontiersman, the impetuous boy, and the unapologetically violent soldier" (Deane, 2017, p. 1). This is a clear shift between principles of community and philanthropy to rugged individualism and fierce competition. Women, then, were left to embody the humanitarianism and selflessness that Victorian men began to oppose: Literary critic Mary Poovey notes that in the Victorian era, so-called "female nature" was deemed to be intrinsically "noncompetitive, nonaggressive, and self-sacrificing" (1995, p. 77). Deane further writes that while early Victorian models of masculinity stressed narratives of personal development ("I am a better man than I was"), later (imperial) models of manliness stressed competition ("I am a better man than he is") (2017, p. 32). Though some readings of "Ulysses" stress Tennyson's references towards camaraderie and kinship (citing lines such as "And drunk delight of battle with my peers" and "One equal temper of heroic hearts"), the poem's male characters continue to separate themselves from larger society—namely, their families and friends in Ithaca—and these "free hearts" continue to pride themselves on adventure and personal liberty above all else, noting in the poem's final line that their primary intentions are "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield"—not to comfort or coddle (Tennyson, 1842, lines 16, 68, 49, 70). Therefore, while there may be brotherhood among those pursuing similar goals, this friendship is contingent upon the whether these men have "toil'd, and wrought, and fought" with Ulysses—he does not express the same kind of closeness with a homebound man like his son Telemachus (Tennyson, 1842, line 46). The imperial soldier fits this new mould faultlessly—athletic, ambitious, and blessed with competitive spirit in a time when the British empire was competing against other emerging empires for resources and prestige (Deane, 2017). Ulysses's strong desire to "seek a newer world" and to "not … yield" indicates the second, more competitive version of Victorian masculinity and illustrates Ulysses's desire to reclaim the glory days of his youth and to assert that, even in old age, he can still be heroic, courageous, and ultimately masculine (Tennyson, 1842, lines 57, 70).

An interesting antithesis to Ulysses arises in Tennyson's second stanza as his son Telemachus is introduced. In this stanza, Ulysses portrays Telemachus as engaging in the local municipal labour he himself cannot, describing him as "centered in the sphere / Of common duties" (Tennyson, 1842, line 39). While Ulysses does not denounce his son for choosing this work (and even calls him "blameless" for doing so), it is clear that Ulysses views less adventurous work—and therefore his son—as effeminate (Tennyson 1842, line 39). In noting that Telemachus displays "tenderness" and induces influence through "soft degrees," Ulysses calls upon characteristics coded as feminine in order to solidify that, even though it is a man performing this labour, it remains "feminine" by nature (Tennyson, 1842, lines 41, 37). Some scholars have divided late-nineteenth century ideals of masculinity into three categories: the "Masculine Achiever" (characterized by competitiveness and independence), the "Masculine Primitive" (characterized by strength and courage), and the "Christian Gentleman" (characterized by willpower, restraint, and discipline) (Nagel, 1998, p. 245). Per his father's description, Telemachus fits into the third category: By nobly choosing to stay at home and cultivate the prosperity of his community, he is practicing the restraint and discipline that men in the other two categories do not possess. By contrast, Ulysses paints the opposite role (the independent, courageous man who travels the world) as the most personally pleasing, writing that the work of more masculine men results in "drunk delight," employs "heroic hearts," and "shine[s] in use" (Tennyson l833, lines 16, 68, 23). By depicting Telemachus's work as work better suited for women and feminine men, Ulysses solidifies the relationship between new masculinity, adventure, and imperialism while simultaneously strengthening the alleged bond between femininity and caregiving.

Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden"—a political poem, released in 1899 and often read by scholars as a plea to Americans, encouraging them to proceed with the colonization of the Philippines during the Philippine–American war no matter the challenges and dilemmas—showcases another reason for the burgeoning stratification of gender roles and the exclusion of women from colonial labour (Brantlinger, 2007). This poem's rhetoric—depicting imperialist work as intellectually and physically difficult, back-breaking labour—makes such work seem unattainable to women who have been socially conditioned to believe that these tasks are beyond their natural abilities. Kipling depicts colonialism as both isolating and high-risk, writing that those who take on this work will be "[bound] … to exile" and will face "[threats] of terror" (Kipling 1899, lines 3, 11). For women who have been trained to think of themselves as family-oriented and physically weak, this is a clear disinvitation from entering this line of work. It quickly becomes interesting to note the duality in how Kipling chooses to portray colonial labour: Although he paints it as treacherous and demanding, he also presents it as, in a way, inherently maternal. He mentions that imperialists will need to feed the mouths of starving people and cure them of disease (a job that, while undoubtedly well-suited for established male doctors, also suited women who were often held responsible for their children's everyday physical care) but acknowledges that these acts—though fundamentally nurturing and tenderhearted—will still be part of a "savage war" (Kipling, 1899, lines 18–20). So, to counter the notion that women, due to their supposed "natural" parental instincts, would be best suited for this job, Kipling is careful to position it as physically dangerous to maintain its exclusivity to men.

Kipling desires to paint imperialism as a moral, motherly obligation and therefore appeal to the "angel in the house"—a quixotic, idyllic, and ultra-submissive image of Victorian femininity popularized by Courtney Patmore's poem of the same title—who believes that her worth is found in the ways in which her virtue and morality serve others. However, his depiction can also be read

as a response to the growing threat of women's involvement in anti-imperialist movements. Historical sociologist Erin L. Murphy writes in her analysis of anti-imperialism and the Philippine–American war that those who opposed the war most heavily were working class White people, Black men, and White and Black women (2009). White women in particular represented a significant threat to imperialists, as many were able to make monetary contributions to anti-imperialist causes due to their upper-middle-class status (Murphy, 2009). These anti-imperialist groups often employed a feminized rhetoric to oppose the unethical and villainous nature of colonialism, stressing the importance of nonviolence and peacefulness (Murphy, 2009). Emerging in the midst of debates concerning the ethical reasoning behind America's involvement in this war, "The White Man's Burden" attempts to appeal to women's moral compasses by conceptualizing involvement in this war as the righteous and honourable thing to do. As Kipling's colonial rhetoric secured the association between masculinity and imperialism, it also attempted to link imperialism and benevolence—a conceivable attempt to appeal to morally-motivated women who were quickly pulling away from colonial ideas.

In analyzing Tennyson's "Ulysses" and Kipling's "The White Man's Burden" together, we can begin to understand the speakers' contrasting beliefs regarding the purpose of masculinity in society: While Kipling believes that it benefits the world at large, Tennyson believes that its purpose lies in personal fulfilment. Kipling's titular phrase—"The White Man's Burden"—implies that Britain's men will receive the exact opposite of personal fulfilment by embarking on colonial journeys as they become bound to "seek another's profit / And work another's gain" instead of their own (1899, lines 15–16). He believes that the years men spend search[ing] [their] manhood" will be "thankless," providing little of the instant gratification that Ulysses acquires throughout his travels (Kipling, 1899, lines 53–54). To Kipling, the value of this labour is not individual accomplishment but the alleged moral benefit it provides to society. By contrast, in his depiction of Ulysses, Tennyson shows his belief that modest, municipal work is the most valuable to society, not to himself. Ulysses cannot find any fault in the feminine, homebound way that his son Telemachus chooses to live his life and sees this as the noble and selfless choice, describing in detail the way that Telemachus's labour benefits greater society (calling it "useful" and "good") while abstaining from doing the same work himself (Tennyson, 1842, line 38). In doing so, Tennyson credits traditionally feminine work done at home instead of work done by Ulysses for the prosperous development of society, placing it on par with his own hypermasculinized labour, which, as my analysis of "Ulysses" suspects, tends to prioritize the individual. On this account, Kipling and Tennyson both argue for a similar type of violent and restless hegemonic masculinity but differ in how they believe that this concept exerts its influence over society at large.

In attempting to fill the "empty boxes" of empire Andrew S. Thompson described in 1997, Victorian writers often took contrasting approaches. On one hand, Tennyson depicts imperialism as a way to assert a new kind of masculinity and fulfil personal desires, dramatizing his speaker's thirst for adventure and equating this desire with an inherently masculine disposition. On the other, Kipling paints imperialism as useful in how it "benefits" society as a moral obligation, and he attempts to appeal to both masculine and feminine identities. Both authors facilitate the development of a new masculinity that is dauntless and determined, yet they differ in the way they claim that this "New Man" asserts influence over his community. In analyzing these corresponding constructions of masculinity and their diverging purposes, we can better understand the fluidity of gender roles and how they were weaponized in Victorian society (and its colonies) to serve political purposes.

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