

Colonial Writers - Introduction

The title of the 'Post/Colonial' section of the Great Writers Inspire website is intended to gesture towards a blurring between colonial and postcolonial, eradicating any reductive conception of the two as simple dichotomies or binary oppositions. Included within this subsection, 'Colonial Writers', are authors that embody this complexity.

Though there are many writers whose work can be described as distinctly colonial, perpetuating racial stereotypes, social hierarchies, and the cultural and technological superiority that justified the colonizing force - we might think of the imperial romances of Henry Rider Haggard (1856-1925), for example - the writers included in this subsection present richer understandings of exactly what it meant to be a 'colonial', to be writing from a 'colony'. If it is the short stories of Rudyard Kipling [1], with their subtle critiques of Anglo-Indian society, the bleak ambivalence of Joseph Conrad [2]'s winding syntax, or the outright anti-imperial critiques of Olive Schreiner [3], these writers configure a space that can be considered at least postcolonial, if not anti-colonial, into their fiction.

This might, at first, seem a little anti-intuitive. Indeed, it is important to remember throughout our reading of 'Colonial Writers' that many of these authors, no matter how 'anti-Empire' moments of their literary texts can seem, were still often compromised by racial beliefs and cultural conceptions of British superiority that were extraordinarily dominant and pervasive amongst colonial societies during the period of high imperialism. However, to discard them completely would be to commit the very discriminatory practice of which many colonial writers are themselves guilty. Instead, we can use the critical eye encouraged by postcolonialism to disentangle and learn from the various ideologies that seep into and out of these literary texts. Such a project reveals to us the complexities of the phenomenons of imperialism and colonialism, allowing us insight into the heterogeneity of beliefs within the imperial enterprise itself. The academic title that this project has earned itself is most commonly known as 'Colonial Discourse Analysis': an analysis of the discourse, or body of knowledge, produced by imperial powers and societies in order to justify their colonial settlement, governmental rule over, and economic exploitation of colonized countries and peoples.

Postcolonialism's preoccupation with the recovery of these complex histories makes it a particularly suitable lens through which to read these authors. It is when we read these colonial writers within the multiplicitous agendas, ethnographies, stereotypes, and ideologies of which colonial discourse was comprised that the full subversive nature of many moments in their work comes to light. They reveal that imperialism's rule was by no means complete, or water-tight, but in fact played host to many internal inconsistencies, contradictions, and voices of dissent. Furthermore, they often acknowledge and gesture towards the existence of indigenous peoples and nativist cultures, in some cases foreseeing the inevitable fall of colonial rule, in others calling - if not directly then within the textual formulations of the literature - for imperial withdrawal. These writers offer unique insights into the colonial mindset, in all its ambiguities and ambivalences, providing an important set of historical and literary texts that must be interrogated and challenged to broaden our understanding of colonial prejudices and global hierarchies, remnants of which are scattered throughout the world we live in today.

See also:

- Post/Colonial Writing - Introduction [4] by Dominic Davies
 - Contemporary Writers - Introduction [5] by Dominic Davies
 - Caribbean Writers [6] by Dominic Davies
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Links

- [1] <http://writersinspire.org/writers/rudyard-kipling>
- [2] <http://writersinspire.org/writers/joseph-conrad>
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