

FORMULAE FOR IMPERIAL STORY TELLING:  
THE FORMATION AND DISSEMINATION OF IMPERIAL VALUES  
IN VICTORIAN NARRATIVES

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For nineteenth-century Britain, the empire was a success story. Or, rather, it was told as such – at least from the 1870s onwards. While the British had managed to ignore their overseas territories until the second half of the century,<sup>1</sup> the growth of their dominions and colonies as well as the pressing problems involved in governing them, did not allow them to remain in that state of blissful unawareness. John Seeley rightly stated that the British had acquired their empire “in a fit of absence of mind”, but when he alerted his audience to the importance of their possessions in his seminal work *The Expansion of England*, published in 1883, the British had already been made aware of the pitfalls of governing allegedly inferior peoples. Disraeli’s famous “Crystal Palace” Speech, given in 1872, had – in a few short paragraphs – turned the empire into an important political topic by integrating it into the programme of the Conservatives in the elections of that year. But even prior to that, the empire had forced itself onto the public imagination through a flood of newspaper articles, diaries, biographies, plays, novels and histories which dealt with the very unwelcome and traumatising events of what came to be known as the “Indian Mutiny” (1857).

The different narratives representing events related to the empire, be it in plays, fictions, poems, works of history or political speeches, were part of a cultural constellation that was, especially at the beginning of that period, fraught with tensions. In contrast to common assumptions, the empire was not something people of that era were altogether comfortable with. Even at the end of the nineteenth century, the aversion to the word “empire” made itself felt, and numerous statesmen who exulted in Britain’s overseas acquisitions also deplored the fact that the marvellous and harmonious unity they celebrated was termed an empire. As late as 1905, Joseph Chamberlain somewhat clumsily asserted that the British empire was not a real empire: “It is not an empire. We use that word; but it is not an empire in the sense in which other empires have existed on this globe.” (Chamberlain 1970: 295)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> But there is of course a growing body of research on the eighteenth century and empire. See for instance Wilson 2004.

<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, Seeley repeated again and again that what had been termed the British empire, for want of a better word, was in reality nothing of the sort: “Greater Britain is not in the ordinary sense an Empire at all. Looking at the colonial part of it alone [that is, ignoring the Indian empire], we see a natural growth, a mere normal extension of the English race.” (Seeley 1884: 307) Many merchants and adventurers did not hesitate to give voice to their imperial desires and “men on the spot” like Sir Cecil Rhodes even acted in

The reasons for this aversion are not hard to divine. After all, ever since at least the later part of the eighteenth century, the British had prided themselves on their love of liberty. This ideal was rather difficult to reconcile with imperialism, with its connotations of subjection and conquest. The Germans, who in the late nineteenth century became notorious for their leanings towards authoritarianism and militarism, might be busy building an empire, but the British self-image forbade such an endeavour. As James Anthony Froude, one of the champions of the empire, succinctly put it: “One free people cannot govern another free people.” (1886: 2) Moreover, the English gentleman was an ideal many Britons aspired to, and this, too, ran counter to imperial values.<sup>3</sup> Gentlemen showed their breeding not only in their polished behaviour, but also in their dealings with their dependants, for whom they cared in a condescending and paternal manner; but a nation of polite, humane, tender-hearted gentlemen would obviously be ill-equipped for the maintenance and administration, let alone for the expansion of a large empire. Moreover, the concept of empire was opposed to local traditions and regional identities.<sup>4</sup>

The integration of the British empire into the national self-image was therefore as difficult as it was necessary. First and foremost, British wealth and the British role as a world power were dependent upon their overseas territories. And furthermore, the British government had to live up to the political challenge. It was supported by Victoria who, having been named “Empress of India” in 1876 with great pomp, now wished to improve the image of the empire by means of a show of power in India. In addition, the Indian revolt of 1857, which for a short time turned British rule in India into a tenuous affair, made it quite obvious that the empire was an undeniable fact. By the

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contradiction to official instructions in order to enlarge the empire, but in Great Britain a different view prevailed. Only after 1874 was empire turned into a political topic at all. But Disraeli was followed by the anti-imperialist William Gladstone. In spite of their contradictory views, both politicians acted similarly as regards imperial expansion. They did not initiate any measures themselves, but intervened when merchants or British citizens got themselves into a dangerous situation in the colonies. Robinson and Gallagher (1978) have coined the term “informal” imperialism for the kind of expansion that was driven solely by merchants and adventurers, differentiating it from the “formal” imperialism practised by the British government.

<sup>3</sup> For the British self-image and its discrepancies with Imperial value see my “Where Literature, Culture, and the History of Mentalities Meet: Changes in British National Identity as a Paradigm for a New Kind of Literary/Cultural History.” (2001 219f.)

<sup>4</sup> The smooth running of imperial affairs depended on the suppression of local rivalries, not only between the English, Irish and Scots, but also between different regions within parts of England and Scotland. Deep-seated antagonisms had to be substituted by a friendly co-operation between different local regions. The extent of regional rivalries and the pride in one’s own county is illustrated by a hilarious scene in Richard Blackmore’s historical romance *Lorna Doone* (1869), where people of Somerset and Devon join in order to fight a gang of robbers tyrannising both counties. The completely inept amateur soldiers fail but they make up for their defeat by lustily fighting each other, something they were keen on doing all along.

end of the nineteenth century, that fact was not only accepted; instead, the majority of the British by that time were proud of their empire and saw it as their “mission” to rule over half of the world. Sacrifices were required, their allegedly benevolent rule was regarded as “the white man’s (read: the Anglo-Saxon’s) burden”, and the discourse of empire had become so saturated with religious imagery that one can think of it as an imperial religion. Even William Gladstone, who accused the British of having abandoned the “old English love of liberty” (1878: 565 and 573) in 1878, rather paradoxically accepted the new role of the empire:

The sentiment of empire may be called innate in every Briton. [...] It is part of our patrimony: born with our birth, dying only with our death; incorporating itself in the first elements of our knowledge, and interwoven with all our habits of mental action upon public affairs. It is a portion of our national stock. (Gladstone 1878: 579)

How did this dramatic change come about? There are a host of factors that need to be considered, ranging from continuously changing constellations in foreign policy over economical developments to changes in attitudes as well as ways of thinking and feeling. A major factor, I would like to suggest, is to be found within the art of imperial story telling.<sup>5</sup> If one wants to concentrate on the new ways of perceiving and evaluating the empire, I think one should focus on the development of representations of that reality, that is on modifications in the stories told about the empire.<sup>6</sup>

I want to stress the importance of the processes of signification implied in giving shapeless events the form of stories, rather than dealing with icons and topoi (though these, of course, are of great relevance as far as the mediation and perpetuation of values are concerned). I think that one can put up a good argument for the importance of narrativisation. After all, both topoi and icons only derive their meaning from stories – they can be described as narrative abbreviations or cultural cues which turn more or less complex narratives into simple images and make sense only to those who know about the stories to which they gave rise (Erl 2007: 27, 94). Thus the famous topoi of Lucknow and the Bibigur can only function as carriers of values if one knows that the former refers to the famous “siege of Lucknow”, thus conjuring up the allegedly heroic behaviour of a few British in the face of a multitude of attacking Indians, while

<sup>5</sup> The dissemination of imperial values is closely related to broader cultural developments. While it is impossible to disentangle the various factors that are involved, I would like to argue that major changes of values are due to changes of perceptions and ways of feeling and thinking. They are both influenced by, and in turn influence institutions, laws, etc. For a rough sketch of the reciprocal relations between mental attitudes, social practices and institutions, and material aspects like texts and monuments, see Posner 1991

<sup>6</sup> These stories are in turn influenced by the actual behaviour of people engaged in imperial endeavours; of those who – through popular stories – are turned into national icons, mostly by being transformed into heroes of stories. There is thus a circular structure, or rather, a spiral that is moving towards an ever-increasing acceptance of the empire. This process might roughly be described as a chain of causalities by which imperial stories reinforce imperial values, which reinforce imperial ways of thinking, which in their turn render familiar certain ways of story telling, etc.

Bibigur is the building in Cawnpore where roughly two hundred British women and children were brutally murdered by the subordinates of the man who later symbolised Indian cruelty and treachery, Nana Sahib.

In this paper I want to look at the narrative conventions that were used to turn very significant, but amorphous happenings into stories which (more or less subtly) convey imperial values. I think that tales about the war of 1857 – significantly referred to as the “Indian Mutiny” by many British, while called “the first Indian war of independence” by Karl Marx and many Indians – were of particular importance for changing the image of the empire, disseminating imperial values, and forging an imperial mentality (Nünning 1996a). The hysterical British reaction to the uprising – even humanitarians like Charles Dickens were heard to clamour for the extermination of the whole Indian race<sup>7</sup> – marks a turning point in the history of the perception of the British empire, while necessitating major efforts of embellishing and distorting events which, if stated with brutal honesty, contradicted the national self-image of a freedom-loving, polite and humane people. Taking the tales of the happenings of 1857 as a body of narratives which demonstrate how easy it is to turn stories into carriers of imperial values, I want to explore what I think of as four major strategies of narrativisation: first, the selection and manipulation of “facts” which become a part of the story; secondly, the configuration of characters and events favourable to the dissemination of values; thirdly, the characteristics of heroes and villains (which are the material of those icons shaped and perpetuated in other media); and fourthly, the mode of emplotment, which comprises factors such as the choice of beginning and end, aspects of focalisation, and the use of story patterns or “master stories”

The way these strategies were employed in the nineteenth century gave rise to stories that disseminated imperial values of heroism, bravery, and valour. The resulting stories, needless to say, are so tendentious that they may as well be called “fictions” This fictionalisation is not due to a lack of knowledge about the events; historians as well as the reading public had access to British eye witness reports on the siege of Lucknow and similar events.<sup>8</sup> These eye witness accounts were more or less reliable, and, as far as British behaviour was concerned, certainly not heroic reports of what happened. Moreover, the alleged glories of the British and the corresponding cruel treacheries of the Indians were debunked right from the beginning, when Edward Lecky published his *Fictions Connected with the Indian Outbreak of 1857 Exposed* (1859). After that, a few balanced accounts were published; however, these never became popular.<sup>9</sup> It is thus not the lack of better knowledge that gave rise to the stories

<sup>7</sup> In a letter to Angela Bourdett Coutts, Dickens said, “If I were Commander in Chief in India I should to my utmost to exterminate the race upon whom the strain of the late cruelties rested [...] and raze it off the face of the Earth.” (1974: 459)

<sup>8</sup> However, practically no Indian accounts of what happened survived.

<sup>9</sup> Cf., for instance, Edward Thomson’s *The Other Side of the Medal* (1924); the *Times*-reporter William Russell savagely criticised the particular gruesome stories as early as 1859. See also Erll (2007: 47ff).

that circulated about the war; it is rather the aversion to the unflattering image of the British that derived from the accounts of eye-witnesses and the desire to produce stories that glorified British behaviour.

### 1. The selection and manipulation of “facts”

In 1973 the French social scientist Claude Lévi Strauss demonstrated that even a seemingly simple historical event like “the storming of the Bastille” is only turned into a “fact” by multiple processes of selection and abstraction (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 296), discarding certain facets deemed unimportant. Ever since this observation we are aware that the choice of apparent “facts” is of major importance for shaping the meaning of an event. With regard to the stories about the Indian rising in general – in particular the siege of Lucknow – this selection was as rigorous as it was one-sided. What nearly all of the stories published in the nineteenth century leave out are the reasons for the revolt. While the newer historiography has made out many significant long-term reasons for Indian unrest and disobedience, most of the popular stories only mention the ill-fated introduction of Enfield rifles, which required Indian sepoy to bite open the cartridges – which were smeared with cows’ and pigs’ fat (!), thus making it impossible for both Hindus and Muslims to touch them. Quite often, the well-proven story of the cartridges is merely referred to as a rumour – implying that only “childish”, ill-informed people would believe it – or even left out altogether. An early melodrama about the so-called mutiny ridicules “the silly tale of *greased cartridges*. The native troops believe their religion in danger”<sup>10</sup> And Miss Wheeler, allegedly modelled on the real General Wheeler’s daughter, can find no answer to her rhetorical question: “What can have induced these sepoy to revolt? It must be the basest ingratitude.”<sup>11</sup> The rebellion is therefore deprived of any rational reasons, which in turn legitimates the reprisal of the British. Even those histories of the rising that begin by embedding the event in 2000 years of Indian history manage to turn it into an illegitimate rebellion. They do so by casting the British as harbingers of civilisation and rightful rulers after the sensuous, irrational, tyrannical reign of the moguls, whose lawful reign could not seriously be challenged by the Indian attempts to turn back the wheel of time (Metcalf 1995).

With regard to the allegedly heroic and stoical behaviour of the British during the “siege of Lucknow”, the pattern of ignoring unwelcome truths is repeated. Many of the first eye-witness accounts, for instance, stress that there was a lot of additional suffering as a result of British snobbery; thus the “ladies” still refused to deal with women of the lower classes, and a few of the echelons of the upper ranks of society feasted on

<sup>10</sup> Compare Somerset’s *The Storming and Capture of Delhi* I.1. The play was licensed on 23 November 1857 and performed at Astley’s Royal Amphitheatre between 28 December 1857 and 25 January 1858.

<sup>11</sup> *The Storming and Capture of Delhi* (1857) I.2.

champagne and other delicacies while many of the others were starving. Needless to say, this behaviour is not mentioned in any of the later stories.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, while even the propagandist of British expansion, John Seeley, emphasised that the British would never have been able to withstand the Indian onslaught had they not been supported by great numbers of loyal sepoys,<sup>13</sup> most of the stories about the “mutiny” neglect to draw attention to that fact.

This denigration of the value of the Indians already points to another technique that can be subsumed under the heading of “manipulation of facts” What is involved here is not just the simple opposition between stating and not mentioning well-known factors, it also includes the space in between, the act of playing around with facts, embellishing some and placing others in the worst possible light. These subtle and not so subtle changes not only accord with the diminution of the number of British or the drastically enlarged number of the Indian enemies; it also pertains to a host of other factors. Thus the “relief of Lucknow” by the arrival of the troops under General Henry Havelock was in fact nothing of the sort. When Havelock arrived after a campaign fraught with questionable decisions and incredible cruelties on the side of the British, he realised that he did not have the means to free the enclosed Britons – thus he and his soldiers had to stay in the residency, thereby further reducing the already diminishing stock of food. Even in many accounts from the twentieth century, however, this “relief” is represented as a triumph; a noble endeavour illustrating the self-sacrifice and gallantry of everybody involved. The true motive for Havelock’s decision to stay in Lucknow, for instance, was said to be his “regard to the large number of women and children and wounded whom it would be necessary to guard through the terrible streets.” (Gilbert 1916: 277)<sup>14</sup> The novelist George Alfred Henty also asserted that the British had been saved by Havelock from a certain death that awaited them the very next morning: “[Havelock] fought his way through the streets of the town to the Residency, arriving there just in time, for the enemy had driven two mines right under its defences. These would have been exploded the next day, and in that case the fate of

<sup>12</sup> Exceptions are diaries or accounts which were published only some time after they had been written down. But historians like Charles Ball even claim that differences “of rank became almost obliterated” (Ball 1858: 10).

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, “No one who has remarked the childish eagerness with which historians indulge in their national vanity, will be surprised to find that our English writers in describing these battles seem unable to discern the sepoys.” (Seeley 1884: 211). Here he is referring to statements like “at Lucknow, a few hundred British men, [...] encumbered with women and children, held, for three months, a suddenly extemporised entrenchment, against an army of at least fifty thousand, backed by an armed and furiously hostile population of millions” (Duff, 1858: 152).

<sup>14</sup> See also Fitchett (1939: 209): “Havelock fought his way through blood and fire into the Residency, but he shrank from leading a great procession of women and children and wounded men along that *via dolorosa*” See also Henty (1896: 123ff). Forrest (1904-1912, 2: vi) comments on this episode: “Outram concludes it is impossible to remove the sick, wounded, women and children.”

the garrison of Cawnpore might have befallen the defenders of Lucknow.” (Henty 1896: 123)<sup>15</sup>

While this might count as a slight distortion of facts meant to cover up disastrous mistakes made by the British, the invention of particular Indian cruelties is rather more sinister – after all, this involves more than a selection and embellishment of ambivalent behaviour in a heated situation in which both sides overstepped the marks of human decency. A recurring feature of the stories is the alleged cruelty towards women and children. The killing of the women and children in Cawnpore (possibly motivated by the success of the British troops, who burned lots of villages on their way to the Bibighur and did not hesitate to inflict the most cruel and imaginative punishments on the Indians they happened to take prisoners and killed immediately afterwards)<sup>16</sup> was certainly bad enough. Beyond this the British spent an endless amount of energy on inventing stories that highlighted the abominable cruelties of the Indians with regard to women and children. Even though any kind of sexual misdemeanour could not be mentioned in Victorian writings designed for the middle class drawing room, the Victorian audience was quite tolerant when it came to the alleged atrocities against British “ladies”, accounts of which were gobbled up by the dozen. Sometimes these reports read like projections of the Victorian imagination, in which Indian soldiers are said to have indulged in passions which bourgeois British citizens had to repress (or at least keep secret):

The cruelties committed by the wretches exceed all belief. They took 48 females, most of them girls from 10 to 14, many delicately nurtured ladies, violated them, and kept them for the base purposes of the heads of the insurrection for a whole week. At the end of that time they made them strip themselves, and gave them up to the lowest of the people, to abuse in broad daylight in the streets of Delhi.<sup>17</sup>

The victims of such tales are mostly ladies, and suspiciously often the very embodiments of “virtue in distress” – innocent and persecuted young women, whose enormous value for all kinds of narratives had already been recognised by William Congreve in 1692.<sup>18</sup> Children, mostly babies, feature as well, be it that they are said to have been forced to eat parts of their parents’ dead bodies or that they are spiked or even roasted themselves. Another recurring formula is the unrepresentability of the

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<sup>15</sup> From late September onwards both sides dug tunnels in order to place dynamite beneath each other’s positions, but no author except for Henty sees any connection to the arrival of Havelock.

<sup>16</sup> They even blew up Hindus by putting them in front of canons, a method of execution whose cruelty is based in the Hindu belief that such a death would make any kind of life after death impossible. Similarly, Muslims were forced to lick up blood from the floor. Ottmar Ette (1991: 161f.) describes such a use of belief as an instrument by which the colonisers functionalised myths.

<sup>17</sup> *Times*, 25 August 1857, p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. his preface to *Incognita, or, Love and Duty Reconcil’d. A Novel*. Not published.

events, which are said to be so gruesome that they simply cannot be told, even to a male audience:

these merciless fiends have treated our countrymen, and still worse, our countrywomen and their children, in such a manner that even men can scarcely hint to each other in whispers the awful details. We cannot print these narratives – as they are too foul for publication.<sup>19</sup>

Thus – often after everything has been described in great detail – the imagination of the audience is appealed to:

Give full stretch to your imagination – think of everything that is cruel, inhuman, infernal, and you cannot then conceive of anything so diabolical as what these demons in human form have perpetrated.<sup>20</sup>

Another narrative convention pertaining to the “manipulation of facts” concerns the internal balancing of the alleged facts: which ones are given most room, and which ones are tuned down? In many works of history and even in a few novels, the reasons for the rising are downplayed while the mostly technological assets of the British rule are emphasised. This is accompanied by an emphasis on the “barbarism” of Indian customs, which the British tried to eliminate. The practice of “suttee”, the burning of widows of whatever age on the funeral pyre of their husbands, and “thuggee”, religiously motivated theft and violence, is highlighted and fictionalised again and again.<sup>21</sup> The most glaring example of stressing “facts” which are favourable to the British is, of course, the killing of the women and children in Cawnpore (and the implied treachery of Nana Sahib). Be they ever so short, nearly all the stories concerning the war emphasise the suffering of the British at the Bibigur, which belonged to “the three great sieges of the Mutiny – Cawnpore, Lucknow, Delhi [...] The very names are like beacon lights flaming through leagues of night!” (Fitchett 1939: 263) Most accounts dwell on the remains of the British, which were found by the Scottish highlanders who came too late to be of any help. The blood, the hair (or rather, locks), the little shoes (sometimes rendered even more gruesome by mentioning the child’s foot that is still in it), the heart-rendering messages allegedly left by the prisoners, and the bibles trodden down under the feet of the murdering infidels – these images are evoked again and again.<sup>22</sup> The impact of this focus on the sufferings of helpless women and children – which goes along with playing down British cruelties – is not hard to detect. Indeed,

<sup>19</sup> *Times*, 6 August 1857, p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> *Times*, 3 August 1857, p. 5. Cf. also *Times*, 5 August 1857, p 9: “I have omitted some details of the barbarities inflicted upon our unfortunate countrymen, which are too harrowing for general perusal.”

<sup>21</sup> A work of history without reference to these two customs is hard to find; the prevalence of both in fictionalised accounts of the mutiny is stressed by Erll (2007: 172).

<sup>22</sup> “[S]oldiers picked up the bloody relics – a handkerchief, a lock of hair, a child’s sock sprinkled with blood – and kept them to steel their hearts to all thoughts of mercy” (Henty n.d., 183). See also Erll 2007: 150.

the writers themselves often make it quite clear just what the result of the Indian behaviour was: “Remember the ladies!” “Remember the babies!” became the war cry of the British, and “Henceforth, to the end of the war, no quarter was ever shown to a sepoy.”<sup>23</sup> The emphasis on Cawnpore casts the British in the role of the sufferers, as well as legitimising every (in)conceivable act of violence on the side of the British. After a skilful handling of the story of Cawnpore, the British could do no wrong.

## 2. Configuration of Characters and Events

The representation of Cawnpore also draws attention to the importance of the politics of configuration. In a set of ideal characters, even a slightly tarnished character will appear as a villain – how much worse does an Indian like Nana Sahib seem when contrasted to the innocent sufferers of his misdeeds and to the simple heroic Scottish soldiers whose only wish is to relieve women and children? And how much worse do the Indians appear when the tragedy of Cawnpore and the siege of Lucknow, in which they were portrayed as the perpetrators of evil, are selected as the most important events of the whole uprising? Needless to say, the stories about the uprising exploited the potential of such configurations to the full.

Again, the manipulation of numbers plays an important role. In Lucknow and in Delhi, the British appear more heroic, because a few – mostly idealised as “a handful” – of the Europeans are set against grossly exaggerated numbers of Indian attackers. This topos of the “last stand”<sup>24</sup> features not only in works of history, but also fictional retellings of the events. Lucknow is thus hailed as “a siege famous among the famous sieges of the Mutiny, wherein a handful of Europeans, filled with the fighting spirit of the master-race and the indomitable pride of Britain, made head against the overwhelming forces of murderous rebels [...] and would never confess defeat.” (Gilbert 1916: 242)<sup>25</sup> A novel like Henty’s *In Times of Peril* even heightens this effect by choosing two young British boys as protagonists, who make their way through India on their own, arriving at all the important places and playing a central role, for in-

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Henty’s novel *In Times of Peril* (n.d.) as well as his *A Sovereign Reader* (1896: 115). The representation of the events in Cawnpore, particularly of the room in which the last murders took place, is strongly influenced by fictional genre conventions in all historiographical works of the “mutiny”

<sup>24</sup> Jacquelin S. Bratton states that: “The ‘few’ became the ‘gallant few’, and heroism became a matter of the glorification of weakness, even suggesting the superiority of defeat and suffering to any triumphal heroics.” (Bratton 1991: 26) This passage alludes to the ideal of the Christian martyr and can thus be described as an instance of a sacralisation of imperial discourse. See also Vera Nünning 1996b.

<sup>25</sup> See also Malleon (1878, 1 451): “It was the triumph of British coolness and pluck over Asiatic numbers and swagger; of the mind over matter. But in a moral point of view it was more important still.”

stance, in the relief of Lucknow. Adjectives like “gallant” or “chivalrous” are often linked to the topos of the few fighting against overwhelming odds, as, for instance, in the following idealisation of Havelock in the eponymous poem by Tennyson which was published in 1858: “Bold Havelock marched,/ Charged with his gallant few,/ Ten men fought a thousand,/ Slew them and overthrew” (Tennyson 1969: 1105). Such references to medieval concepts of honourable fighting – or rather popular and nostalgic Victorian reconstructions of medieval values – also link the completely secular combat against the Indians to the crusades; the British are thus turned into noble Christians fighting the heathens (Erl 2007: 151ff).<sup>26</sup>

The structuring of the “*dramatis personae*”, which usually implies that there are a few well-identified groups, is also invested with meaning, with fictional works slightly differing from other accounts. In those writings, which might loosely be called historiographical, the British are either individualised as great heroes (commanders etc) or are portrayed in collective terms as one of the body of loyal troops; the Indians are uniformly depicted as cruel and treacherous, with the number of loyal sepoys often being conveniently forgotten. In novels and plays, this rather schematic characterisation of the Indians is diversified. Of course, the image of the inscrutable Oriental, who seems to enjoy murder and acts of barbarism, is present in the depiction of the Indian attackers or sometimes even in the Indian servants. Thus Mahomet, the servant of the hero’s antagonist in Henry Arthur Jones’ melodrama *Carnac Sahib* (1899), nearly succeeds in murdering the hero, Major Carnac, and a nameless Indian spy sells his secret to the British, but keeps up the pretence that he has been captured and forced to give it up. However, apart from these duplicitous and cunning Indians, there are also good, devoted servants, who in this play, significantly, work for the angel-like young virgin Ellice and Major Carnac, and who even help to prevent the murder of the hero. These servants, however, mainly serve to highlight the worth of the British, who are so exemplary that they even win the hearts of lower-class Indians.<sup>27</sup> The impact of these constellations for the imperial endeavour is clear: the British are mostly heroes, whatever the particular role they play,<sup>28</sup> and the few good, loyal Indians are on their side. Thus legitimised, they bravely fight against masses of duplicitous Orientals, who deserve to be defeated.

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<sup>26</sup> For the popularity of nostalgic ideas about medieval codes in general and chivalry in particular see Girouard (1981).

<sup>27</sup> A similar mechanism is at work in Henty’s *In Times of Peril*. Class differences are also important, but their representation is rather complex and would take up too much space to be explored in detail here.

<sup>28</sup> In order to provide narrative tension to (often several) subplots – always involving love affairs, etc. – there have to be a few bad British characters – but even those differ fundamentally from the Indians. Thus Syrratt, the man who is Carnac’s rival in love and who condones his murder, eventually repents and seeks atonement by courageously joining the besieged British. For his sacrifices, he is at last forgiven by Carnac.

Though this division into two major groups is refined in various ways, the (British) heroes are usually presented as benefactors; or, if they are not explicitly shown to be so, they are at least characterised as brave, just, efficient, competent and even sensitive to the needs of others. This representation – as a matter of course – required a finely tuned manipulation of the facts. Harshness, self-aggrandisement and mismanagement are forgotten, while the few good features of the British in India were shamelessly enhanced and glorified. Their motives are beyond all reproach, since they are acting out of noble and generous impulses: they either fight in order to protect women and children, or in order to revenge outrageous Indian cruelties.<sup>29</sup> The Indians, by contrast, may be cruel and duplicitous as well as cunning (which at least implies some kind of intelligence) – but especially the lower classes are often depicted as naïve and slow-witted. In George Daventry's *The Indian Mutiny* (1892), for instance, even a typical stage-Irishman, who is by definition as stupid as a stage character can possibly be, manages to dupe the Indians, who are taken in by his costume and believe him to be an Indian, even though he does not speak a single word of the language. O'Brien has to answer with unrecognisable imitations of Indian words, uttering syllables like “ba-ba” (IV, 2) – but he still manages to deceive the Indians, who are apparently even more stupid than he is.

### 3. Characteristics of Heroes and Villains

This differentiation into several groups already points to a characterisation of the British as heroes and the Indian as villains. With regard to the changes in the attitudes concerning the empire, the question of agency is of crucial importance: who is active, and who reacts? This is especially relevant in times of war, of course. As long as the ideal of the gentleman held any force, and as long as the ideal of liberty was paramount, it was impossible to cast Britons as people actively involved in cruelties and murder – even in order to enlarge or (re)gain their overseas territories. The Indian uprising plays an important role here, since the British behaviour was beyond doubt extremely cruel and gruesome and therefore extraordinarily difficult to justify. It was important to cast the British as heroes reacting against Indian provocations. This was achieved by various means, most of which are closely related to the characteristics of heroes and villains. Cawnpore plays a major role here: the British are simply revenging the deaths of the women and children; their gruesome fighting appears as an act of retribution. This is not only given in various works of history, but also in the earlier fictional accounts of the “mutiny” Henty, for instance, shows his young hero Dick as someone who is reluctant to kill. When Dick muses that “[i]t's horrid to think of killing a man in cold blood”, however, his young friend Ned removes his scruples, “There is no help for it, Dick. [...] These scoundrels are all mutineers and murderers. This

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Henty, *In Times of Peril* (n.d., 28-30, 65, 159).

regiment has, no doubt [sic], like the others, killed its officers, and all the men, women, and children, at the station.” (65)

However, some major changes occurred in this area within the second half of the nineteenth century. While the mutiny took place at a time when the British had not yet accepted their empire and their own role as governors and soldiers, their reluctance to the use of violence in imperial warfare dwindled during the following decades, when they became slowly accustomed to seeing themselves as heroes actively engaged in conquest. To fight for the empire was not seen as an act threatening the liberty of others and involving ungentlemanly cruelty any more, it was rather an end in itself, a duty involving the self-sacrifice of thousands of individuals.

When Henry Arthur Jones published his melodrama *Carnac Sahib* in 1899, the characteristics of the British differ from earlier accounts – at least as far as their agency is concerned. Though the play retains many of the features discussed above (there are no real reasons for the uprising; under siege the Indian servants are not loyal and want to leave the British to their fate; loyal Indian soldiers are hardly mentioned; the major aim of the British is to save persecuted maidens in distress, and so on), fighting has become an end in itself. The unspecified violence emanating from the Indian side still suggests that the British were provoked and only want to defend their (rightful) rule. However, the fighting itself no longer has to be legitimised. All the characters – including the clergyman! – are keen to prove their valour by acting heroically, i.e. by fighting. The adjective most often joined to the word fight is “jolly”; the men want to win their women’s regard through heroic deeds, and “honour” won by fighting is craved by every male character; so much so that even the women are keen to stay close to the battle. While Ellice, the good heroine, only wants to be near her father and her relatives in order to endure the same fate, her counterpart Olive, the fallen woman the two colonels fight over, looks forward to seeing armed combat for its own sake – for her, outstanding courage on the battlefield is an important criterion for choosing her lover.

There is a shift in emphasis: in the early accounts, which were still partly informed by traditional prejudices against a “standing army”, fighting has to be justified; with Cawnpore as the ultimate legitimisation for British “retribution” The stories about the Indian rising, however, gave rise to a new ideal of the “Christian soldier”, which has already been analysed in great detail.<sup>30</sup> General Havelock in particular had been turned into an (unlikely) role-model in that respect: His piety and his Christian values were stressed again and again (Nünning 1996a: 63; Erll 2007: 151). With breathtaking speed, Havelock was turned into the epitome of a Christian, a mild and tender hero. The poet Lord Alfred Tennyson was only one of many who praised his character and deeds in his poem “Havelock”, which was published on the occasion of the general’s death in the beginning of 1858:

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<sup>30</sup> Cf., for instance, Graham Dawson’s *Soldier Heroes* (1994: 123-31).

Bold Havelock died  
 Tender and great and good,  
 And every man in Britain  
 Says 'I am of Havelock's blood!' (1969: 1105)

At the end of the century, when the imperial discourse had integrated religious language, symbols and rituals, it was the other way round: rather than embellishing the role of the soldier with religious attributes, religion was turned into a handmaiden of the empire (Nünning 2000). It is only logical, then, that the reverend Hobbs in *Carnac Sahib* (1899) is characterised as a “round-faced, good-tempered, jolly-looking young English clergyman, with nothing clerical about him except his dress” (I,1, p. 5) who is eager to join the fighting and who wins the respect of soldiers by his valour. Thus the wayward Barton is made to repent of his former conduct while the reverend's worth is proved on the battlefield: “Well, Padri, I promise you I'll never say an unkind word about a parson again [. . .] and you know [...] I wasn't nearly as good to my mother and sisters as I ought to have been.” (IV,3,130)

The close relation between stories and attitudes can also be witnessed with regard to the characterisation of women, since tales about the mutiny contributed to some developments which postulated the addition of certain features to the “ideal” female behaviour.<sup>31</sup> While the “angel in the house”, a largely passive role model who was only allowed to leave the house on special occasions and in the company of at least one chaperone, was characterised as pure, obedient, and devoted to her husband and children, the demands of mutiny-stories changed this tune. On the one hand, traditional features were emphasised; the patient waiting and self-sacrificing devotion to the children and the wounded during the siege of Lucknow as well as the imprisonment in the Bibigur certainly fitted the prevalent image of the angel as well as the recently established image of the “Lady with the Lamp”, as Florence Nightingale was called. On the other hand, additional characteristics proved to be instrumental in the construction of heroic female behaviour. Next to the patient suffering and nursing, many authors like Mowbray Thomson stress qualities that add new elements to the image of the “angel in the house”:

But our heroic sisters [...] handed round the ammunition, encouraged the men to the utmost, and in their tender solicitude and unremitting attention to the wounded, though all smeared with powder and covered with dirt, they were more to be admired then, than they had often been in far different costume, when arrayed for the glittering ball-room. (Thomson 1859: 100)<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Two other components of this change are the new ideal of the woman as a professional nurse, which had been advocated by Florence Nightingale and became very influential during the Crimean War (1853-1856), and the characterisation of heroines in Victorian melodrama, which will be discussed below.

<sup>32</sup> Many accounts (wrongly) stated that British women had acted as voluntary nurses in the hospital during the siege of Lucknow; cf. Ball 1858, 2: 53).

Not many accounts claimed that women played an active role in the defence against the Indians, but at least passive courage and patient suffering of bodily hardship came to be praised as important characteristics necessary to the preservation of the empire. As early as 1859, A.G. Macpherson accordingly asked for a change in female education, which he claimed to be necessary in order to enable women to defend the British empire. Instead of weakness and fear, different characteristics had to be fostered, and a girl should learn, “to suppress the voluntary manifestation of fear, to keep herself calm and quiet, [...] crush back her fear into her heart, and [...] do her duty as gallantly as himself.” (MacPherson 1859: 109)

Moreover, the imagined lust “black men” felt for white women, and the resulting tales of abduction and rape gave rise to another ideal of female behaviour. This included her resistance to the supposed rapists, sometimes culminating in her single-handedly killing the villains. If resistance came too late, the longing for death or even death itself was preferred to subjection, for her morals would make it impossible for her to continue to live with the knowledge of past or the dread of future rape. A very popular, often retold account of a woman who was raped, but managed to revenge herself only to kill herself afterwards, was that of Miss Wheeler, the daughter of the commanding officer in Cawnpore. One reason for this popularity may have consisted in the fact that there is at least a small grain of truth in this story, because a Miss Wheeler existed, though her name was Margaret instead of Ulrica,<sup>33</sup> as she was usually called. This, however, is where the (rough) accordance with facts ends, for there are many conflicting accounts, and no reason to believe in the alleged rape and her heroic behaviour.<sup>34</sup>

The image of fighting women was not only disseminated in paintings, but also in melodramas, the most popular genre of Victorian drama. These plays, which were valued by all Victorian classes, often featured women who were not in accord with the requirements of the “angel in the house” As Merle Tönnies (2005) has shown, about seventy per cent of the female characters were actively engaged in fighting; they did not suffer insult and persecution passively, but took their lives in their own hands – sometimes also acting on behalf of the slightly less than heroic male protagonists. They used pistols, daggers and even dynamite in order to rescue themselves and their beloved, and thus demonstrate that the Victorian ideal of woman was not as monolithic as has often been believed. The representation of the participation of women in the Indian uprising fits well into this scheme, and it comes as no surprise that any number of “mutiny plays” catered to the taste of a patriotic and sensation-loving audience and helped to familiarise the spectators with these unusual protagonists.<sup>35</sup> In one of the

<sup>33</sup> Ulrica appears to be a reference to the courageous heroine of Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*.

<sup>34</sup> For a short summary of different versions of the episode see, for instance, Erll 2007: 74ff.

<sup>35</sup> The most well known of these is probably Dion Boucicault’s *Jessie Brown, or The Relief of Lucknow* (1858; first performed in New York). In contrast to well-established facts, Jessie stabs and kills Nana Sahib and saves one of the protagonist’s children.

early mutiny melodramas,<sup>36</sup> Miss Wheeler (here called “Matilda”) characterises herself in a way that proves to be typical both of her attitudes and her behaviour: “Do not imagine Matilda Wheeler capable of fear. Only give me arms and should we [a group of women] meet the rebels doubt not we are able to defend ourselves without an escort.” (II,1)

#### 4. Mode of Emplotment

Whether the British or the Indians come across as the heroes of a particular story is, of course, partly dependent on the narrative conventions which are used to depict their characteristics. Whether a character’s behaviour is deemed to be an instance of bravery or just a foolish, misguided, egotistic and dangerous attempt to display his own courage depends on the particular situation in which it is flaunted and on the narrative means by which it is described.

In a postmodern age, in which so much energy has been devoted to debunking grand narratives, one is bound to ask whether one can identify a master narrative and story patterns which have turned into stock features. On a very general level the above mentioned stories are part of a very simple plot: the good British heroes go out to become the benefactors of inferior races and they encounter treachery as well as (in)gratitude; they react to the conditions of a particular situation and make sure that justice is achieved. This again can be related to two larger patterns of explanation: firstly, the idea of the elect nation is invoked, which gives Britain an important and singular role as God’s chosen people that has to ensure the survival of Protestantism as well as spread it over the world. Secondly, the theory of the four stages of societal development is referred to.<sup>37</sup> Later it will be refined into Darwin’s theory of evolution, and then simplified into the belief that there is a progress of nations, with the Anglo-Saxons at the uppermost peak of civilisation – to which once again was added the duty to spread civilisation among the “heathens” Failure in particular endeavours may accordingly be cast as instances of tragedy, but that does not endanger the grand design; set-backs, martyrdom and self-sacrifices are to be expected. This encompassing narrative cannot be modified or even falsified by singular events, which might always be interpreted as a tragic event demonstrating the need to sacrifice, in Kipling’s famous words, “the best you breed” In the overall story, poetic justice is bound to prevail, even if individual sacrifices are required.

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<sup>36</sup> *The Storming and Capture of Delhi* (C.A. Somerset, Astley’s Royal Amphitheatre, lic. 23. November 1857). See also the self-characterisation of Mrs. Ingleby in George Daventry, *The Indian Mutiny*. Gaiety Theatre, Burnley, 26 December 1892: “I am a soldier’s wife and I would have my daughter trained to be the same. [...] By understanding how to use the sword, I once saved my husband’s life” (I, 3.)

<sup>37</sup> For an explanation a brief account of the “four stages” theory, see Thomas 1999: 345-346.

An important aspect for the evaluation of events is the choice of a beginning and an end. Obviously, fictional accounts of the uprising usually began with Indian acts of resistance or their storming of British barracks and bungalows. This put the Indians firmly in the position of the aggressor; especially when combined with the insistence that there was no reason for the ‘ingratitude’ of the Indians. Thus it was not the British who were cast as aggressive and prone to use weapons in order to reach their goal of conquest and expansion, but the Indians, who were said to have been (unreasonably) violent and moreover unjustified in conquering British space.<sup>38</sup> The myth of Lucknow may have proved to be so enduring because of this reversal of the roles of aggressor and victim, in which the British were cast as innocent sufferers of Indian attempts at conquest. Historical accounts of the war needed to begin earlier than the siege itself, of course, but they managed to convey the impression of Indian aggressiveness by highlighting the benevolent intentions and effects of British rule. Thus, many of them emphasise that the British brought not only Christianity, but also technological advancement as well as British concepts of justice and efficient administration, and hence stressed the benevolence of British rule, against which it was – by implication – unreasonable as well as ungrateful to revolt.

Just as effective as a device is the (dis)placement of “facts” in a temporal or at least linear order. After all, it is not always easy to disentangle chronological relations from causal ones. This strategy is often used in fictional accounts; in Henty’s novel, for instance, British soldiers are shown to kill Indians only reluctantly, out of necessity, until they hear of the tragedy of Cawnpore. Whereas Henty’s narrator explicitly draws the readers’ attention to this fact, history books work on a more subtle basis. Christopher Hibbert’s popular account of the “mutiny”, published in 1978, for instance, proceeds in a roughly chronological way (though he has to keep up with different strands of the narrative and relate what happened nearly at the same time in different places), but he significantly changes the chronological order by placing the chapter on the murders in Cawnpore before his chapter on the British destruction of villages and the killing of many thousand inhabitants of Allahabad – thus implying that the earlier British behaviour was “just a revenge” for an Indian act of atrocity which, in fact, happened later (Brantlinger 1988: 201, 294).<sup>39</sup>

From the point of view of assessing the literary merits of a particular work, the question of the narrative potential of the genre that is chosen is primarily significant.

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<sup>38</sup> This replacement of the roles of aggressor and defender is often used in adventure fiction, see Vera Nünning 2001

<sup>39</sup> For an example of a twentieth-century example of how the temporal order of events is broken (without explicitly referring to a causal relation between them), see Hibbert 1978. In the melodrama *Jessie Brown* (1858), Nana Sahib is not only made to appear in Lucknow, he is also provided with the motive “to kidnap one Ms. Cambell for his harem”, which, it is suggested, is “the only motive [...] for the Mutiny as a whole” (Brantlinger 1988: 206). Thus Indian lust is placed at the centre of the uprising. See also Erll 2007: 137.

The conventions of adventure stories, for instance, lend themselves well to the configuration of characters and the recurrent episodes that could be made out in the accounts of the Indian war of 1857. Tales of adventure from this era require an active (or reactive, but physically as well as psychologically strong) British hero; the cast of characters consists of types rather than individuals, which makes the schematic portrayal of the Indians and the British more credible, and there is a simple division into good and bad characters, which is particularly suited for the dissemination of imperial values.<sup>40</sup> The numerous episodes which depict fighting and which illustrate the prowess, pluck and inventiveness of the heroes serve to show British qualities at their best, and the happy ending is presented as a manifestation of poetic justice, showing that the good British will always defeat their foes, no matter how cruel, numerous or cunning they may be. The emphasis on action also serves to highlight the physical superiority that is granted to the British, while more delicate matters like the legitimacy of the endeavour are referred to the background and answered implicitly by foregrounding noble motives like rescuing persecuted maidens or taking revenge on cruel foes. With the exception of children's stories, these accounts are often combined with an element of romance, in which a love story complicates the behaviour, decisions and attitudes of the British heroes.

The potential of the genre conventions of adventure fiction for the dissemination of imperial values was already recognised by Charles Kingsley. In 1855, Kingsley integrated many of them into his historical novel *Westward, Ho!*, in which he set out to disseminate imperial values and reinforce British morale at the time of the Crimean war. While Kingsley's praise of "muscular Christianity" prepared the ground for the acceptance of the ideal of the "Christian soldier", numerous novels by George Alfred Henty found their way into children's rooms and were given away as school prizes. The enormous numbers of copies that were sold show that Henty hit the nerve of his juvenile audience.<sup>41</sup> The fact that many similar, slightly simplified tales were cast as comics and published in the popular boys' magazine *Boys Own Paper* further testifies to the attractiveness of the story-pattern.

While literature usually focuses on a few individuals and invites readers to identify with the heroes, works of history have to cover a wider ground, which renders the presentation of values more abstract and less focused. Though there are many dramatic and scenic renderings of key events – like the arrival of the British soldiers at the Bibigur – genre conventions require a rather neutral summary of the most important

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<sup>40</sup> For an overview of the typical features of adventure fiction in the late nineteenth century, see Nünning 2003.

<sup>41</sup> Many other writers made use of the same genre in order to instil allegedly innate British values into a populace many thought of as in danger of degeneration; in addition to Andrew Lang, Henry Rider Haggard, Hall Caine and George Saintsbury, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle employed the genre conventions in many of his novels, even if his tales are set in medieval times.

developments.<sup>42</sup> This is highlighted by the convention of the aloof narrator, who, just like the “authorial narrator”, has to give a neutral and balanced view of happenings in which he is not personally involved. Value judgements, explanations and speculations about motives are possible, of course, but their presentation is not as immediate as the immersion in events and identification with protagonists that fictional and dramatic accounts can provide. A more direct way of engaging the reader’s sympathies is available in biographies – and it may be no coincidence that biographies, often encompassing three large volumes, became very popular in Victorian times. In these works, which usually idealised the person portrayed, it was possible to highlight the perspective of an individual. Just as in fictionalised accounts, particular events could be graphically depicted, and the focus be laid on a personality who, in the case of “mutiny biographies”, served to popularise the glorified British version of events and disseminate Victorian values.<sup>43</sup>

The question of perspective – or, in narratological terms, focalisation – is particularly important as far as the text-internal evaluation of actions is concerned. Readers tend to understand and even sympathise with characters or biographical subjects whose thought processes, motives, sufferings and joys are accessible. The choice of a focaliser is therefore of crucial importance. As might be expected, nineteenth-century mutiny novels tend to provide access to thoughts and emotions of British characters only. The Indians are presented as a more or less inscrutable mass, whose treachery is summarised; plausible reasons for Indian behaviour from the Indian point of view are practically non-existent. The politics of representation become even more problematic when positive comments on the British are not just relegated to other British characters or to the narrator, but also to Indians. In nearly all of the novels and plays, Indian characters – even villains – admire British behaviour and character traits. In Henty’s novel, a rich and benevolent Indian lady recognises the worth of the British: “How brave you English boys are”, she said. “No wonder your men have conquered India.” (152) In contrast, even Britons who are congratulated on their knowledge of Indian habits and language, speak only derogatorily of Indian lack of intelligence, which is illustrated by

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<sup>42</sup> This is not to say, however, that historical works necessarily provided neutral reports of the events. All strategies discussed so far can be found (albeit in different combinations) in all traditional British narratives of the mutiny. Although historical works could not get away with the disregard for the (allegedly non-existent) reasons for the rising that was demonstrated by the numerous novels and plays that were written, they underlined the beneficial consequences of British rule and highlighted the “ingratitude” of the rebels, who were, in addition, inaccurately said to consist only of Indian soldiers in a British pay, while disregarding the participation of a large number of peasants.

<sup>43</sup> Henry Havelock has already been mentioned as a popular character for a vast number of biographies. There was a large number of idealised renditions of the individuals involved in the mutinies; particularly popular were John Lawrence and Henry Lawrence. The ease with which biographies lent themselves to the dissemination of Victorian values may be one of the reasons for the popularity of the genre in the second half of the nineteenth century.

the following comment by an Englishman in the melodrama *The Indian Mutiny*: “Ten men passed before their eyes ten times fixes the belief there is a hundred – they count them every time.” (Daventry 1892: I.3) The superiority of the British is not even questioned by the Indians themselves. When an Englishman tells Achmet, an Indian of obscure morals, in the very popular melodrama *Jessie Brown* that “these black rascals are mere scum” (I.1), Achmet answers “Allah Akbar! It is so, we *are* scum.” (I.1)

The stories display different forms of perspectivisation which serve to derogate Indian characters and values as well as idealising the British. In spite of emphasizing Indian cruelty again and again, Henty, for instance, uses focalisation in combination with disregarding significant pieces of information in order to highlight the unspeakable act of murdering two hundred women and children. Like many other narrators, he refrains from describing the event; instead, he stresses the cruelty of the deed by showing the effect which the remnants of it had on hardened soldiers:

Awed and silent, the leading officers entered the house [Bibigur], and, after a glance round, recoiled with faces white with horror. The floor was deep in blood, the walls were sprinkled thickly with it. Fragments of clothes, tresses of long hair, children’s shoes with the feet still in them – a thousand terrible and touching mementoes of the butchery which had taken place, there met the eye. Horror-struck and sickened, the officers returned.  
(182)

In ideologically charged narratives, the internal evaluation of actions is often flaunted by simple instances of poetic justice. Actions and motives which are presented as praiseworthy are usually rewarded within the story. Thus the behaviour of Indian characters who help the British is rewarded (though the “reward” sometimes consists in the continued goodwill of the English masters), while those who plot against the British are unsuccessful and/or punished in the end (with gratuitous acts of cruelty also passed off as revenge). The British heroes, who are good by definition, are of course rewarded for doing their duty, fighting against Indians and rescuing maidens in distress. Motive is important, too: fighting simply to impress the ladies or to get the better of one’s rivals does not suffice; there must be an earnest desire to do one’s duty and to help other characters. That such instances of poetic justice, which become manifest at all stages of the story, are common practice in many nineteenth-century novels as well as part of the conventions of genres like adventure fiction and melodrama highlights once again that certain stories are particularly suited to the dissemination of (imperial) values.

What should be emphasised, however, is that the stories of empire examined above do not reflect pre-existing imperial values; they are rather used to produce changes in the hierarchy of values. Moreover, they serve to forge new links between cherished values on the one hand and the empire on the other. To do one’s duty and to help others were – at least in principle – highly regarded objectives in Victorian times. The stories of empire connected these ideals with the imperial endeavour: to support and rescue British characters, and to fight unruly natives are new specifications of the overall ideal of duty. In addition, the cluster of values concerning “civilisation” was modified with regard to the empire. While eighteenth-century gentlemen would not

have linked their alleged superiority to the attendant duty to “bring civilisation” and technical advancement to “backward” peoples, their Victorian counterparts suppressed the earlier connection between gentility, leisure and politeness and emphasised those aspects of “civilisation” that fitted in with the expansion of the empire. In addition, “gallantry” and “honour”, which the middling ranks had associated with a suspect and degenerate aristocracy in the eighteenth century (Nünning 1995), were given pride of place again and connected with heroic fights for the empire. Christianity and physical strength were linked in order to advocate an ideal of “muscular Christianity” and “Christian soldiers”, of which Havelock became the first and prime representative. The most important impact of imperial demands on a reconfiguration of values probably concerns the re-evaluation of differences within the British. In spite of many eyewitness accounts, historians and writers of fiction are united in their endeavour to show that there were no class differences in the empire; everyone suffered and triumphed in similar fashion. The new fiction of an Anglo-Saxon “master race” also combats former notions of regional and ethnic differences: valiant Englishmen, brave Scottish soldiers and even stupid Irish spies, all are cast as heroes, united in their fight to rescue the British compatriots and overpower the natives. The construction of the fundamental difference between the British and the other, one of the underlying threads in all of the stories mentioned above, thus forged a consciousness of British unity, which was later on challenged by the process of decolonisation and its attendant problems for British politics.

## 5. Conclusion

Stories can be persuasive, and I believe that they are even more convincing because they do not put forward logical arguments and legalistic proofs. Many of the stories discussed here have only a tangential relation to particular events. I doubt that many spectators of Victorian melodramas really believed that Nana Sahib was present at Lucknow (as *Jessie Brown* would have it) or that Carnac Sahib existed and that the events in which he was involved referred to the situation during the “mutiny”. Similarly, I would not want to claim that juvenile readers of an adventure story by George Alfred Henty believed that there were two young Britons who actually experienced what is described in the novel. Works of history, however, claimed to give truthful accounts of the events, and even the fictitious tales were, I think, more persuasive than is often recognised. After all, listening to the story of a life in danger provides readers with a thrill of adventure. It engages their sympathies, inviting them to identify with the heroes, to accept or admire their attitudes, to wish them well – and to abhor their foes. Paradoxically, some features of fictions – their aesthetic qualities, their nonchalant way of dealing with facts, and the genre conventions of, for instance, adventure tales – may well have worked to enhance the ideological force of fictitious narratives. The fact that the fictions put forward “no general truth claim” (Grabes 1997: 11) en-

courages suspension of rational judgement and makes it easier for readers to be taken in by some of the more implausible and even contradictory aspects of imperial ideology.

Moreover, the “suspension of disbelief” may work in favour of the ideological force of fictional narratives. On the one hand, we do not believe in the reality of the events the protagonists are involved in. On the other hand, fictions may catch us at an unguarded moment, when our rational defences are down. Quite a number of scholars would, for instance, claim that they learned a lot about daily Victorian life by reading nineteenth-century novels, or about history and geography while reading historical fiction. This alleged side-effect of the reading of adventure tales explains why parents and teachers liked them: such stories were thought to provide useful knowledge without their readers realising (and resenting) it. As late as 1954, Godfrey Davis could begin a scholarly article with the statement that most middle-aged Britons thought that they had learned their history from Henty (Davis 1954/55: 159).

Of course, not all kinds of story are convincing in a given culture. Some narrative conventions and key cultural values must be adhered to. One of the more enduring images to evoke sympathy and assent is, of course, the suffering of those who are harmless and innocent, particularly a persecuted maiden in distress. This points to the importance of threatened ladies and babies as necessary ingredients in imperial adventure fiction, which was brilliantly satirised in E.M. Forster’s novel *A Passage to India* (1924), in which the alleged rape of Adela Quested inspires the sequestered British (safely gathered in their club) with the atmosphere of

the Residency at Lucknow. One young mother – a brainless but most beautiful girl – sat on a low ottoman in the smoking-room with her baby in her arms [...]. [S]he was generally snubbed; but this evening, with her abundant figure and masses of corngold hair, she symbolized all that is worth fighting and dying for. (1981. 188)

Uncharacteristically, Forster’s ironic jibe at the brainless beauty as a symbol of English values (and hypocrisy) is quite explicit. The narrator is even more acerbic when he refers to the “natural” behaviour that begins when people start “speaking of ‘women and children’ – that phrase that exempts the male from sanity when it has been repeated a few times.” (Davis 1954/55: 190ff) The need to defend ladies and babies certainly played an important role in the stories of the war, but, as I have tried to show, its significance was greatly enhanced by its integration into various strategies of narrativisation. The discussion of the conventions used in the stories was meant to demonstrate that it is worthwhile to pay attention to the forms of storytelling rather than just focusing on thematic aspects or explicit statements or phrases that can be extracted from a narrative. The adjustment of values and, by implication, of ways of thinking and feeling was made possible by the use of genre conventions and of quite common – though probably not consciously used – strategies which served to make these stories more palatable to contemporary readers. They helped turn the empire into a success story – with rather sinister implications not only for the national self image but also for the

people who became the victims of the prolonged British expansion. Words can make worlds, certainly.

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