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# Rewriting Rebellions: The Manichean Allegory and Imperial Ideology in the Works of H.G. de Lisser

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**Rewriting Rebellions:**

The Manichean Allegory and Imperial Ideology in the Works of H.G. de Lisser

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Retelling Rebellions was essential to the aims of colonialist literature. By rewriting history with the aims of their present circumstances in mind, colonialist writers sought to shape both how their readers viewed the past and, by extension, their opinions about what should be done in the future. Rebellions that focused on racial inequality were particularly compelling topics for European colonialists. By retelling black rebellions, colonialists sought to discredit those who challenged white supremacy, minimize violations of justice committed by white people or inherent to the imperial system, and ultimately rewrite rebellions as purges that served to reify the social order after only momentary upheaval. Early twentieth century mixed race Jamaican author Herbert George de Lisser rewrote two important black Jamaican rebellions in this way, the Morant Bay Rebellion and the Christmas-time slave rebellion of 1831, in his novels *The White Witch of Rosehall* and *Revenge: A Tale of Old Jamaica*. His colonialist retellings of these rebellions aimed to convince his audience of the former and continuing importance of British rule in Jamaica.

De Lisser likely chose to rewrite these two rebellions in particular because of their racial motivations and because they loomed especially large in the minds of early twentieth century Jamaicans. Both rebellions protested systems of white supremacy and racial inequality. The Baptist War was sparked by the 1831 House of Commons debates over whether slavery should be immediately abolished, and growing rumors that all enslaved people would soon be emancipated.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion protested the unjust use of police power against black communities and the continued domination of white planters despite the end of slavery some thirty years before.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reckord, "The Jamaican Slave Rebellion of 1831," 109-110.

<sup>2</sup> Cavanaugh, "The Cause of the Morant Bay Rebellion: 1865."

These rebellions were perceived as particularly dramatic and important both for their effects and for the persons involved in them. The events of the Baptist War hugely influenced members of Parliament to pass the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the excessive force that the Jamaican government used to repress the Morant Bay Rebellion, resulting in the death of at least seven hundred and ninety three black Jamaicans, led to the recall of Edward John Eyre, the Governor of Jamaica, as well as the liquidation of the Jamaican House of Assembly. This entirely rid Jamaica of its representative government.<sup>4</sup> A limited representative system would only be reinstated in 1884, after which its merits and downfalls would be debated for well over a decade. These debates raged well within the lifetime of many of de Lisser's readers.<sup>5</sup> The effects of these rebellions (the abolition of slavery and of full representative government) were thus extremely tangible to de Lisser's audience.

Additionally, both rebellions were led by a class of political/religious actors that de Lisser's audience would have been extremely familiar with: religious revivalists. Religious revivalists, through African-derived or syncretic religions, emphasized social involvement, populism, and racial justice. The Baptist War was largely organized by one religious revivalist tradition in particular, Native Baptism, a tradition that mixed Baptism with African-derived practices. Native Baptist rebels drew from missionary philosophy of spiritual equality to argue for earthly equality, and cast Christian missionaries as their allies.<sup>6</sup> Despite the adoption of missionary rhetoric, it was the African-derived nature of Native Baptist practices that stood out to many. For this reason, even white victims of the Baptist War were occasionally associated

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<sup>3</sup> Reckord, "The Jamaican Slave Rebellion of 1831," 109.

<sup>4</sup> Heuman, *The Killing Time: The Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica*; Bilby, "Image and Imagination," 41–72.

<sup>5</sup> See Froude, *The English in the West Indies: Or, The Bow of Ulysses* and Thomas, *Froudacity: West India Fables by J.A. Froude Explained by J.J. Thomas* for a famous example of this debate.

<sup>6</sup> Reckord, 111-112.

with African-derived “witchcraft” and “superstition,” including the sensationalized figure of Annie Palmer, after whom *The White Witch of Rosehall* was named.<sup>7</sup> The Morant Bay Rebellion was likewise led by a prominent religious revivalist and Baptist preacher, Paul Bogle.<sup>8</sup> These religious revival movements gained steam throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. They also became increasingly politicized and frequently displayed anti-imperial sentiment.<sup>9</sup> Early religious revival actors like Bogle and the Native Baptists of 1831-32 were thus increasingly important cultural icons for Jamaicans and increasingly prominent targets for imperialists. Thus, it was the Morant Bay Rebellion and the Baptist War’s driving personalities as well as their effects that made them such prominent points of reference for early twentieth century Jamaicans. Because both rebellions were explicitly racially motivated and because they loomed large in public memory, especially as connected to religious revivalism and anti-imperialism, these rebellions were conspicuous fodder for de Lisser’s imperialistic aims.

It is important to note that, unlike many colonialist authors, de Lisser was not a colonist from the metropole himself. Rather, he was a middle class Jamaican intellectual of mixed race. De Lisser was born to a black Jamaican father and Jewish-Portuguese mother. Orphaned at fourteen, he began working for newspapers at a young age and grew to become the editor in chief of the Kingston *Daily Gleaner*, a member of the Board of Governors of the Institute of Jamaica, and the Secretary of the Jamaican Imperial Association.<sup>10</sup> His popular works of literature and journalism, in addition to his steadfast public service and service in the banana and sugar industries, gained him popularity in predominantly conservative Jamaican artistic, political, intellectual, and social circles. Although in his early life de Lisser was hailed as an

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<sup>7</sup> Donahue, “The Ghost of Annie Palmer,” 243.

<sup>8</sup> Cavanaugh, “The Cause of the Morant Bay Rebellion: 1865.”

<sup>9</sup> Paton, “Obeah in the Post-Emancipation Era,” 148-155.

<sup>10</sup> Birbalsingh, “H. G. De Lisser,” 141-143.

idealistic Fabian socialist for recognizing that Jamaican society was still largely determined by factors of class and race, by the end of his life he had become an arch-conservative, adopted by many conservative institution.

De Lisser's moment in imperial history was a complex one, half way between what JanMohamed has termed the dominant and hegemonic phases of imperialism. The dominant phase, which JanMohamed argues was from conquest to independence, was largely unconcerned with the culture of the "savage." Europeans could exploit colonial resources directly with technological and military superiority without interacting with or attempting to change a colony's culture. The hegemonic phase, what some have called neocolonialism, extends from independence to present. This phase is characterized by the coercion of indigenous people to accept a version of the colonizer's values, morality, and institutions, and, JanMohamed argues, is especially characterized by accepting a European-derived form of Parliamentary government.<sup>11</sup> Jamaica in the early twentieth century shared the direct threat of military intervention that characterizes the dominant phase, but had also accepted British parliamentary institutions on a local level within the British system. In addition, increasingly throughout the nineteenth century and extending through the twentieth, missionaries and imperialists like de Lisser were extremely concerned with the culture and religion of the "native."

Thus, while the covert mission of colonialism was clearly still the exploitation of resources from Jamaica by the British government, increasingly the overt mission of colonialism was a civilizing one.<sup>12</sup> One way de Lisser sought to promote a civilizing mission and discourage an anti-colonial mindset was by showing the rebellions in his novels to be insignificant, easily quelled, and self-destructive. Both novels end with the complete squashing of the 1831 and

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<sup>11</sup> JanMohamed, 62.

<sup>12</sup> JanMohamed, 62.

Morant Bay rebellions, the execution of their leaders, and the return of the social order stronger than before. In addition, de Lisser shows the insignificance of these rebellions by foregrounding romantic rather than political plots. Shifting the focus from rebellion in *The White Witch of Rosehall*, de Lisser introduced a new figure to the Annie Palmer legend, an Englishman Robert Rutherford. This young man becomes the center of a love triangle between Annie Palmer, himself, and a free woman of color, Millicent. Enraged that a black woman would dare to challenge her for a white man's love, Annie uses Obeah, an African-derived spiritual practice, to curse Millicent. The rest of the story focuses on Annie's competition against Millicent's grandfather, Takoo, over Millicent's life. In this novel, the 1831 rebellion is ultimately sparked by Takoo's personal vengeance against Annie.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, *Revenge: A Tale of Old Jamaica* focuses heavily on the romance between a white plantation owner, Dick Carlton, and an English woman, Joyce Graham. Paul Bogle's own daughter, Rachael, also falls in love with Dick Carlton, but her love is never requited. Instead, Raines, a maroon and a fair-weather revolutionary, is her intended match. When Rachael spurns him to protect Dick during the revolt, he seeks his revenge by accusing her in military court of Dick's supposed murder, for which she is executed.<sup>14</sup> Thus, in both *Revenge* and *The White Witch of Rosehall*, even the actions of

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<sup>13</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*.

<sup>14</sup> De Lisser, "'Days of Terror': A Dramatic Novel." Please note that, while I will be referring to this novel as *Revenge: A Tale of Old Jamaica* in the text because that is how it is most often referred to by scholars, I more properly will be citing "'Days of Terror': A Dramatic Novel," its serialized version. The serialized version saw the widest distribution. The book form was only printed for de Lisser himself and a group of his friends. In fact, because of this it is now incredibly difficult to access this novel. Only the second half of the novel, including the end of the second section and the entirety of the third is available through the *Daily Gleaner's* archives. Copies of the novel in book form exist only in four libraries in Jamaica and the United Kingdom. Because of these difficulties, I have only been able to access and read the second half of the novel. Luckily, this is where the rebellion actually occurs, and where I would have focused my analysis anyway. Much of the first half of the plot can also be inferred through the final pages. Nonetheless, I will not use language that indicates knowledge of every word of the novel as I have been unable to access to first section due to these archival difficulties.

revolutionaries and their families are dictated more by romance and self-indulgence than morals or political principle.

De Lisser also expresses the need to civilize the native through a common technique to colonialist writers: the Manichean allegory. This allegory connected black, African, and “native” traits with evil, disorder, and inferiority, while connecting white, European, and colonist traits with good, civilization, and superiority.<sup>15</sup> However, by using the Manichean allegory to portray, in extreme terms, the need for a civilizing influence, de Lisser shows the hypocrisy of his own argument. By inhabiting opposite sides of the Manichean allegory, the colonizers and the colonized in de Lisser’s novels share little to nothing in common. Unable to meet on common terms, they are locked into a Fanonian struggle where the colonizer can only continue to exist by complete domination and the colonized can only be free by completely destroying or displacing the colonizer. To maintain their dignity as living human beings, then, the colonized Jamaicans in de Lisser’s novels are forced into a state of constant rebellion.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, de Lisser’s novels are best understood using Fanon’s terms of “native” and “colonizer.” Taking this into account, it is clear that de Lisser’s civilizing impulses would never succeed in creating a civilized society or a civilized native. Instead, his ideology merely serves to continue exploitative imperial aims. Thus, de Lisser’s novels *The White Witch of Rose Hall* and *Revenge: A Tale of Old Jamaica* attempt to present a Jamaican imperialist argument for a “civilizing mission” based on the Manichean allegory; however, de Lisser’s argument proves self-defeating, and his novels ultimately show the hypocrisy of an imperial system that claims to value a civilizing mission but sees the native and his/her culture not only as the absence, but the opposite of civilization.

### **Manichean Depictions of Religion**

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<sup>15</sup> JanMohamed, 63.

<sup>16</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 35-37.

The clearest use of the Manichean allegory in de Lisser's works centers around religion. In both *The White Witch of Rose Hall* and *Revenge: A Tale of Old Jamaica*, only Christianity is considered to be a licit religious system. Christian actors are portrayed very favorably, while non-Christian actors, especially those practicing Obeah, are shown as cruel, manipulative, and bloodthirsty. The Manichean allegory is thus primarily clear in the association of European Christianity with civilization and goodness, and the association of African Obeah with chaos and evil. However, de Lisser takes this one step farther by only associating white people strongly with Christianity, and more commonly associating black people with Obeah than whites. This takes particularly strong historical license considering both rebellions were led primarily by black Baptists. De Lisser's blatant manipulation of history reveals his own aims to paint both rebellions as Manichean colonial struggles, rather than liberation movements.

Obeah practitioners and characters closely associated with Obeah appear in each novel. The most conspicuous of these are Annie Palmer, Takoo, and an unnamed Obeah woman in *Revenge*, all of whom are shown involved in Obeah ceremonies or manipulating Obeah spirits. While Takoo and the Obeah woman in *Revenge* are de Lisser's original creations, Annie Palmer was a folkloric character who had already been associated with Obeah by other authors. Palmer was a real, but by the time of de Lisser's novel, already highly fictionalized female plantation owner killed in the 1831 rebellion. James Castello's 1868 pamphlet *Legend of Rose Hall Estate in the Parish of St. James* had popularized the image of Annie Palmer as "Jamaica's White Witch" who utilized her sexuality, violence, and Obeah to achieve her aims.<sup>17</sup> Annie Palmer was an important ghost story figure, whose challenge to patriarchal rule and adoption of African religion made her ready fuel for horror and sensationalism.<sup>18</sup> Her unusual status as an Obeah-

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<sup>17</sup> Donahue, "The Ghost of Annie Palmer:" 243.

<sup>18</sup> Lomas, "Mystifying Mystery," 79.

practicing female plantation owner also made her a convenient scapegoat. De Lisser could in this way claim that her cruelty was a result of her gender and religion rather than a typical product of the planter class and slave system. Paul Bogle is also closely linked to Obeah in de Lisser's works, although he is never shown openly practicing it. His relationship with the spirituality is certainly more complicated as a Baptist preacher, but de Lisser assures his reader that "underneath the veneer of his religion lay deep the superstitions of the African savage."<sup>19</sup> The racial and political dimensions of shutting Paul Bogle out of Christian identity will be explored later, but for now it will suffice to emphasize de Lisser's constant identification of Bogle with "the high priest of some heathen cult."<sup>20</sup>

All of these Obeah-associated or practicing characters are presented as essentially evil or extremely brutal. When Annie first appears, she is shown enjoying the harsh whipping of her slaves, and is more than once described as a "she-devil" and a "witch."<sup>21</sup> Her supernatural actions are always intended to instill fear in or harm those around her. Likewise, Takoo is depicted as fearsome, described on his first appearance as a "savage-looking black man."<sup>22</sup> He proves this savagery by the end of *The White Witch of Rosehall* when he strangles Annie Palmer with "unpitying exaltation" in her own bedroom.<sup>23</sup> While the unnamed Obeah woman in *Revenge* is not shown directly engaging in acts of violence, she views a "great gathering" of "bloodshed and war" carried out by rebels with "impish glee."<sup>24</sup> Paul Bogle is shown as perhaps the most cartoonishly evil of all these characters, starting a rebellion clearly out of lust for power and

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<sup>19</sup> De Lisser, "Days of Terror," 20 Jan. 1914: 17.

<sup>20</sup> De Lisser, "Days of Terror," 20 Jan. 1914: 17; 6 Jan. 1914: 20; and 13 Jan. 1914: 20.

<sup>21</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 26-27, 107.

<sup>22</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 105.

<sup>23</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 249.

<sup>24</sup> De Lisser, "Days of Terror," 6 Jan. 1914: 20.

fame, and, like Takoo, choking and biting someone (this time the maroon, Raines) to death for the murder of his daughter.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to Obeah practitioners, at least one Obeah ceremony appears in *The White Witch of Rosehall*. Although this ceremony is a healing ritual Takoo performs to attempt to save his granddaughter's life, it is still presented as unnerving and violent. In addition, it is not only Takoo who is implicated by this ceremony, but all of the participating religious devotees. De Lisser presents the ceremony through the eyes of an outsider, his protagonist, Rutherford, to emphasize its foreign and eerie nature:

About twenty yards away, a concourse of people crouched upon the ground... from whose lips streamed forth an eerie, curious sound... It was nothing that even Rider had ever heard before, no Christian words or air; it was something that had come out of Africa and was remembered still. There were people in the swaying crowd who had been born in Africa, and in their minds and emotions they had traveled back to that dark continent tonight and were worshipping again some sinister deity with the power and will to harm, one to be propitiated with sacrifice and who would not be turned aside from his designs by mere appeals or prayers for mercy.<sup>26</sup>

Also during the ceremony, Takoo sacrifices a "snow white kid," which de Lisser uses to emphasize the brutal and violent nature of this deity and of the religious practitioners.<sup>27</sup> This passage clearly illustrates that de Lisser considered Obeah sinister because of its African origins. Not only are the participants in this ceremony from Africa, but they must actually travel back there in their minds to summon this spiritual power. The phrase "Christian words or air," indicating that the very air had been sucked of its Christianity, indicates de Lisser's belief that African-derived and Christian religions were mutually exclusive, another essential component of Manichean opposition. De Lisser also implicitly compares Obeah's deities to the Christian God, commonly called a "redeemer," by emphasizing the unmerciful nature of the ceremony's deity.

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<sup>25</sup> De Lisser, "Days of Terror," 20 Jan. 1914: 17.

<sup>26</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 206.

<sup>27</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 208.

In this comparison, Obeah's deities come out looking considerably less favorable and forgiving than the Christian God, and Obeah practitioners appear bloodthirsty and foreign.

A number of Obeah spirits also appear in de Lisser's novels. While de Lisser's depictions of these spirits are in line with descriptions by modern Obeah practitioners, they are extremely selective, showing only those Obeah spirits who have negative connotations. For instance, de Lisser mentions duppies several times throughout the book. Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert define duppies as sinister ghostly manifestations of Obeah spirits.<sup>28</sup> De Lisser shows that some of these duppies reside on Rosehall plantation and are heavily implied to be the ghosts of Annie Palmer's murdered husbands. These, she can keep from harming her only by "the force of [her] mind."<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, some spirits are intentionally summoned by Annie, including the "Rolling Calf." The Rolling Calf is an infamous Obeah spirit and harbinger of evil that appears in the shape of a giant bull.<sup>30</sup> Annie summons this spirit to interrupt Takoo's healing ceremony intended to cure Millicent of Annie's curse. The ritual participants scatter in fear as soon as they see the apparition and even the steel-nerved Takoo eventually flees. This results in the failure of the ritual and, subsequently, Millicent's death.

De Lisser continues to associate Obeah with evil by presenting the Obeah figure of the Old Hige. Sometimes known as a *soucouyant* in other Caribbean nations, the Old Hige is the Caribbean iteration of the vampire as well as the witch.<sup>31</sup> Always female, the soucouyant sheds her skin at night and turns into a ball of fire. She can then visit her victims, mostly children, and suck their blood. This often results in the death of the victim.<sup>32</sup> In *The White Witch of Rosehall*,

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<sup>28</sup> Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, "Obeah, Myal, and Quimbois," 170.

<sup>29</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 50.

<sup>30</sup> Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, "Obeah, Myal, and Quimbois," 171.

<sup>31</sup> Struselis, "Postcolonial Ghosts in the Caribbean," 97-8.

<sup>32</sup> Anatol, "Vampires from the Caribbean: The Soucouyant."

Annie Palmer appears to Millicent as an Old Hige. Although Annie does not turn into a ball of fire so much as a misty spirit, and Millicent is hardly a small child, Annie's transformation nonetheless conforms to every other aspect of the soucouyant figure, including its terrifying and sinister nature. When attacking Millicent spiritually, Annie "sheds her skin" and her physical body remains outside the house. Millicent also claims that the Old Hige "'bit me here,' - Millicent touched a spot between her breasts - 'a sharp, cruel bite'"<sup>33</sup> and Takoo solemnly confirms, "What she says is true. Old Hige come here last night an' suck her blood."<sup>34</sup> It is this supernatural attack that ultimately results in Millicent's death. De Lisser's depiction of Obeah spirits and practices is clearly a case of selective attention. De Lisser only presents sinister spirits being used for malevolent purposes. He does not represent the true range of Obeah's spirit world. By depicting Obeah practitioners, rituals, and spirits negatively, de Lisser begins the process of demonizing African-derived religious practices and setting up a Manichean comparison between Obeah and Christianity.

In addition to demonizing Obeah, de Lisser conflates different African-derived spiritualities. Annie Palmer and Takoo are both described as Obeah practitioners. However, their spiritual practices turn out to be far more complicated than that. Paul Bogle's real spiritual affiliation under his Baptist veneer is even vaguer. Takoo, for instance, is referred to as an "African witchdoctor"<sup>35</sup> and "a high priest of Sassabonsum or some other potent god of the African forest."<sup>36</sup> Not only is Takoo lazily likened in this phrase to a leader of almost any African "forest" religion (a descriptor that has racist connotations itself), but Sassabonsum is not even truly a god. Rather, Sassabonsum is a monster of the silk cotton tree in Ashanti folklore.

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<sup>33</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 149.

<sup>34</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 151.

<sup>35</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 71.

<sup>36</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 207.

While the silk cotton tree is revered by Obeah practitioners, it is unlikely Obeah users in de Lisser's time would have called on this mythical monster.<sup>37</sup> Rather, conflating Obeah with the worship of an Ashanti monster was clearly intended to attribute further sinister qualities to this spirituality. Even less specifically, Bogle's alleged superstition is not even named. Instead, de Lisser focuses vaguely on his crippling fear of ghosts and prophecies that "were slowly driving him mad."<sup>38</sup> Like Takoo's spirituality, the African origin of Bogle's beliefs are highlighted, naming them only "the superstitions of the African savage."<sup>39</sup> Annie Palmer's spiritual power proves to have similarly muddled religious origins. De Lisser reveals that Annie was influenced in her childhood by a Haitian Baroness and "Voodoo priestess" who "talked to her about... the spirits who inhabited and animated everything, and how human beings... could acquire power over these spirits."<sup>40</sup> In this way, de Lisser equates Obeah with Voodoo (more accurately, Haitian *Vodou*), worship of Ashanti monsters, and various religions "of the African forest." By conflating these African-derived religious practices, de Lisser argues that Jamaican spiritual practices in 1831 and similar ones in 1929 were no different than African or Haitian ones.

Comparing something to Haiti or Africa almost always carried negative connotations to British colonists in the early twentieth century. This was partially because the Manichean link between Africa and evil was so deeply entrenched. James Froude, for instance, argued that if the British "abandoned" the West Indies, they would become "like Hayti, with Obeah triumphant, and children offered to the devil and salted and eaten."<sup>41</sup> Likewise, the "dark continent" in de Lisser's mind was a place of "primitive emotions," "strange and horrible religions," and

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<sup>37</sup> Berry and Spears, *West African Folktales*, 28-29.

<sup>38</sup> De Lisser, "Days of Terror," Jan. 20 1914, 17.

<sup>39</sup> De Lisser, "Days of Terror," Jan. 20 1914, 17.

<sup>40</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 137.

<sup>41</sup> Froude, 144.

“madness.”<sup>42</sup> Haitian *Vodou* was feared by imperialists more specifically for its association with violent black rebellion, as *Vodou* was a prominent feature of the Haitian Revolution at the turn of the nineteenth century. Similarly, Obeah was connected with rebellion in the colonial imagination. After all, Obeah practitioners’ involvement in Tacky’s Revolt in 1760 spurred the legal outlaw of Obeah in Jamaica.<sup>43</sup> De Lisser perpetuates this association not only through his equation of Obeah with *Vodou*, but by fictionally attributing the start of the real 1831 rebellion to Takoo’s murder of Annie Palmer. In *The White Witch of Rosehall*, then, an obeahman is yet again the leader of revolt, and not for the noble reasons of a freedom fighter, but motives of revenge.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, de Lisser depicted Bogle, the leader of the Morant Bay rebellion, as someone with close ties to Obeah through his friend and advisor, the unnamed Obeah woman, and through his own “superstition.” Indeed, Bogle even connects himself directly to Haiti and *Vodou*-practicing revolutionary leaders by thinking, “The white men were afraid: they knew that the people were stronger than they, and could drive them out as the whites had been driven out of Hayti: and he it was who would be called upon to play in Jamaica the part of the Havtian Generals of whom he had heard.”<sup>45</sup>

Only Annie Palmer, a white woman, does not participate in black rebellion. Rather, Annie seems to be the result as well as the victim of black rebellion. She was, after all, taught everything by a Haitian Baroness, a black woman who would never have gained the social standing of Baroness or interacted so closely with Annie without the Haitian Revolution. In addition, Palmer wages her own self-interested revolt as a female plantation owner. It is all but explicitly confirmed in *The White Witch of Rosehall* that Annie murdered her previous three

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<sup>42</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 205-210.

<sup>43</sup> Paton, “Witchcraft, Poison, Law, and Atlantic Slavery,” 235–64.

<sup>44</sup> Dawes, “An Act of “Unruly” Savagery,” 7.

<sup>45</sup> De Lisser, “Days of Terror,” 3 Jan. 1914: 17.

husbands. While the second two were debatably crimes of passion, the first was certainly to gain her husband's wealth and land.<sup>46</sup> In the same way that de Lisser's rebel characters sought to violently overturn and reverse racial hierarchies, then, Annie Palmer manages, on a small scale, to overturn and reverse patriarchal hierarchies, associating her, if not with black rebellion, with a different kind of power struggle. Her place as a subversive woman in this power struggle is indicated not only by her literal murder of a patriarch, but by her sexual aggressiveness towards Rutherford and her association with witchcraft.<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, through Annie Palmer, de Lisser equates all African-derived religious practitioners with witchcraft. When discussing Annie Palmer, one of Rutherford's coworkers, Burbridge, says, "I believe the damned woman up there is in league with hell. She's a witch."<sup>48</sup> This refers to the European notion that witchcraft and, indeed, any pagan spirituality included collusion with the devil.<sup>49</sup> Annie Palmer also encapsulates key stereotypes of the European witch. As already explored, Annie's femininity is important to her spiritual strength. This is in accordance with European conceptions of witchcraft, which argued that women, especially independent, powerful women, were more likely to become witches.<sup>50</sup> She is also linked to child murder, not only through her association with the soucouyant, but because she places "a child's skull smeared with blood" on Millicent's door as a part of her curse.<sup>51</sup> This, once again, parallels

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<sup>46</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 219.

<sup>47</sup> Paravisini-Gebert, "The White Witch of Rosehall and the Legitimacy of Female Power in the Caribbean Plantation," 26-30.

<sup>48</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 165.

<sup>49</sup> Kramer and Sprenger, "The Methods of the Devil," 23-25; Cotton Mather, "On Witches and Witchcraft," 42-46.

<sup>50</sup> Kramer and Sprenger, "Why Women are Chiefly Addicted to Evil Superstitions," 289-295.

Note: Since Obeah and witchcraft were considered illicit, Annie's power must also be illicit. However, as a woman without physical strength or the cultural support that maleness afforded in 1831, de Lisser shows Annie must rely on spiritual power to rule Rose Hall and Palmyra plantations. Thus, de Lisser argues that female rule of plantations is necessarily illicit. This feminist analysis of the text is important but outside the scope of this paper. See Donahue, "The Ghost of Annie Palmer," and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, "The White Witch of Rosehall and the Legitimacy of Female Power in the Caribbean Plantation."

<sup>51</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 140.

the early modern European belief that “witches... specialize[d] in the killing of babies and small children.”<sup>52</sup> This equation of Annie’s spirituality with witchcraft appears even in the title.

Witches existed in Manichean opposition to Christians, as the inverse of good spiritual power. Associating Obeah with witchcraft is thus the final piece of de Lisser’s Manichean religious scheme.

Although African-derived spiritual practices are equated with European witchcraft in this novel, it is important not to mistake this for a partial equation of Obeah with “European-ness,” as witches were always considered outside of mainstream society. Only Christianity and rational moral secularism are identified with Europe in de Lisser’s novels. All of de Lisser’s European characters are at least cursorily Christian. Perhaps more importantly, all of his English characters engage in moral and scientific quandaries with level-headed rationality, free from the superstition that plagues de Lisser’s native characters. Rider from *The White Witch of Rosehall* stands out in particular as a shining example of Christian rationality and goodness because of his former status as a missionary. Rider serves as the moral compass of this novel, using both the Bible and scientific principles to advise others, particularly Rutherford.<sup>53</sup> Rutherford, for his part, often argues with Annie in defense of English propriety.<sup>54</sup> In addition, unlike Annie and Takoo’s life-taking impulses, Rider and Rutherford’s impulses are to save lives, showing moral superiority.<sup>55</sup> Like these British men, Mrs. Carlton, Dick’s mother in *Revenge*, is depicted positively as a level-headed Christian. She speaks with “habitual strength of mind” and “thank[s] God for the respite they [are] given” when the rebels temporarily retreat.<sup>56</sup> This stands in sharp

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<sup>52</sup> Cohn, “The Non-Existent Society of Witches,” 50.

<sup>53</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 160-166.

<sup>54</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 48-49.

<sup>55</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 9.

<sup>56</sup> De Lisser, “Days of Terror,” 13 Jan. 1914: 20.

contrast to the rebels who rush without thinking into haphazard attacks and respond to gunfire with decreased “ardor” and “confused and indistinct” voices.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the “West Indian *ethos*” is presented as “liv[ing] life gaily, riotously, dangerously,”<sup>58</sup> and every time Rider and Rutherford do not act in accordance with morality, it is not presented as a moral failing of their English upbringing, but as succumbing to “the fascination of the tropics.”<sup>59</sup>

In addition, rather than falling easily into “superstitious fear” like Bogle or the Jamaican slaves that Annie Palmer terrorizes, European characters use their rationality to find other, secular explanations for strange occurrences. These explanations are more in line with enlightenment values of de Lisser’s time. Rutherford and Rider, the only English-born people in *The White Witch of Rosehall*, argue that Annie’s power does not have supernatural roots, but is, in fact, “mesmerism.” Rider also argues that all effects of Annie’s power are “purely mental, not supernatural at all;” in effect, because Millicent convinces herself that she is cursed and dying, she does indeed die.<sup>60</sup> In the early twentieth century, this approach certainly would have been seen as more rational than believing in witchcraft or the power of Obeah. Rider and Rutherford also observe Takoo’s ritual remotely, from the bushes, in an ethnographic mode typical of early twentieth century anthropologists. This would have been considered a very scientific, and thus more reliable, approach to understanding Obeah.<sup>61</sup> Importantly, no Jamaicans adopt this scientific view; instead, all Jamaicans, especially black Jamaicans, resist non-supernatural explanations. For instance, when Rutherford suggests to Millicent that her illness could all be in her head, Rutherford observes that “there was no acceptance on Takoo’s face of what seemed the

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<sup>57</sup> De Lisser, “Days of Terror,” 13 Jan. 1914: 20.

<sup>58</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 34.

<sup>59</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 124.

<sup>60</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 164.

<sup>61</sup> Lomas, “Mystifying Mystery,” 79.

right and rational explanation of what had occurred.”<sup>62</sup> The ability of these two Englishmen to explain events through scientific methods thus paints them as more rational than their Jamaican counterparts.<sup>63</sup>

Indeed, even black Jamaican characters who claim to be Christians or appear rational are proven to be irrational heathens by the end of each novel. Bogle is the clearest example of this. As already discussed, while he claims to serve as a Baptist preacher, he is really serving his own ambition. In addition, he models himself after non-Christian rebellion leaders, like the *Vodou* practitioners of Haiti. In *The White Witch of Rosehall*, one of the only expressions of Christianity seen from black characters is invoking Christ for protection against Annie’s Rolling Calf. However, this expression is shown to be disingenuous, or at least not Christian as defined by missionaries, since the same enslaved Jamaicans who scream “Oh Christ” were moments before engaged in Takoo’s Obeah ritual to save Millicent.<sup>64</sup> Despite the outlier of Annie Palmer, then, de Lisser’s religious Manicheanism clearly extends along racial as well as regional lines.

The comparative immorality and irrationality of Jamaicans, especially black Jamaicans, then seems to be deeply connected to African-derived spiritual practices. Upon seeing Millicent’s condition after Annie’s curse, Rutherford lashes out against Takoo’s “foolish superstitions,” saying, “Why the hell do you all think such frightful, beastly things? You all live in hell with your degraded imaginations: there is nothing clean and healthy about your minds. Your souls are blacker than ever your skins could be.”<sup>65</sup> De Lisser’s Manichean equation of blackness and African-derived Obeah with witchcraft, evil, and irrationality versus his equation of white English characters with moral uprightness and rationality shows that he considers

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<sup>62</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 150.

<sup>63</sup> Dawes, “An Act of “Unruly” Savagery,” 2, 4-5.

<sup>64</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 208-210; Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, “Obeah, Myal and Quimbois.”

<sup>65</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 150-152.

England, the metropole, to be in greater possession of licit civilization than the colony of Jamaica. To maintain and build civilization in Jamaica, de Lisser argues, the white metropole must maintain an active role in predominantly black Jamaica, just as Rutherford does in suppressing the 1831 slave revolt.<sup>66</sup> Otherwise, all will fall into the chaos of the “dark” continent. In this way, de Lisser makes an imperialistic and racist argument for continued British rule of Jamaica predominantly through the tool of religious Manicheanism, showing that he viewed African religions as the most corrupt aspect of Jamaican society.

### **The Corrupting Influence of the “Native”**

While the clear Manichean equations of black, African, superstition, and evil versus white, European, rational, and good hold true for the majority of de Lisser’s characters in both *The White Witch of Rosehall* and *Revenge: A Tale of Old Jamaica*, there are a few significant outliers who fail to fall easily within these binaries. Annie Palmer, the “white witch,” is the clearest of these examples. Although she is white, she is nonetheless associated with Africa and Haiti, evil, and practices “superstitious” Obeah instead of licit Christianity. In addition, while Millicent and Rachael, extremely similar characters with similar roles in each novel, are black, Jamaican, and often “superstitious,” they are nonetheless good, as defined by de Lisser and the white protagonists of his novels. Millicent and Rachael are clearly supposed to represent the hope of de Lisser’s civilizing mission. However, the ultimate death of these young black women reveals the slim extent to which even de Lisser believed in that hope. In addition, Annie Palmer’s perverseness reveals, in Fanonian terms, de Lisser’s fear of corruption by the native, who is the “negation of values” rather than merely the “absence of values.”<sup>67</sup> Ultimately, Annie Palmer’s

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<sup>66</sup> Dawes, “An Act of “Unruly” Savagery,” 10.

<sup>67</sup> Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 41.

death in addition to Millicent's and Rachael's eliminates all Manichean outliers in de Lisser's novels, leaving perfect Manichean worlds where imperialism is easily justified and necessary.

Annie's conspicuous presence as an evil white woman in *The White Witch of Rosehall* has led some to argue that her character represents the evils of the slave system and the absence of morals in the plantocracy. This is exhibited by her apparent joy at seeing enslaved people whipped and her assurance to Rutherford that black laborers, "don't count; they don't have feelings."<sup>68</sup> However, while de Lisser certainly seems to recognize the immorality of Annie as a slave owner, it is not her or the other characters' connections with the slave system that mark them as good or evil. After all, Rutherford's father is an absentee owner of a Barbadian plantation and he is depicted as largely unproblematic, just blissfully unaware of the realities of life in the British West Indies. Rider, also, freely works on plantations as a "bookkeeper" (a job which involves some actual book keeping and more slave driving) and is depicted as the most honorable and rational character in *The White Witch of Rosehall*. Likewise, Millicent's death and thus Takoo's motivation for murder is not a part of the slave system, as Millicent is a free black woman. Rather than slavery, all of the problems of the novel, and particularly of Annie Palmer, trace back to her connection with the native, particularly African-derived spirituality and Jamaican codes of sexuality and appropriate gender expression.

Annie Palmer's connection to her teacher, the black *Vodou* priestess, connects her not only to illicit religion but, through Manichean equation, to the native and blackness, as well. De Lisser seems to express anxiety through this sinister early figure in Annie's life that, if the native were to hold sway over young white people, then evil Manichean values could corrupt them. This view of the native is common to colonialists, as Fanon observed when he argued that

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<sup>68</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 32.

colonists treated evangelizing the colonized in much the same way they treated disease; both, he argued, were a process of eliminating yet unborn evil. Similarly, colonial apartheid and racial segregation measures attempted to quarantine native populations and their corrupting influences.<sup>69</sup>

Annie's sexual and gender expression is also likened to black characters in the novel. While it is clear that both Annie and Millicent inhabit patriarchal spheres where, under most circumstances, they would be forced to defer to men for many of their life decisions, both Millicent and Annie's sexualities are seen as freer and less moral than Rutherford's conception of English female behavior. This active sexual behavior is euphemistically referred to as "the West Indian *ethos*" by Rutherford.<sup>70</sup> This includes Annie's "invitation scarcely to be misunderstood" that Rutherford should sleep with her in the Great House and their frequent extramarital sexual meetings throughout the novel.<sup>71</sup> It also includes Millicent's interest in being Rutherford's "housekeeper" without legally marrying him, which is, as she says, "if you like me an' I am your housekeeper... You would be my *husband*, don't you understand?"<sup>72</sup> The association of both of these sexual acts with "the West Indian *ethos*" clearly indicates that de Lisser viewed Annie's promiscuity as a product of her inhabitation in the colonies and her association with the native. Additionally, when Annie finds out that Millicent and Rutherford have begun a semi-sexual relationship, she becomes extremely jealous. It is this jealousy that leads her to curse Millicent and spur the rest of the plot. Thus, active native female sexuality not only lacks decorum according to the protagonist, but is extremely destructive and destabilizing. For these reasons, Annie's cruelty is not shown as a normative product of the plantocracy but of

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<sup>69</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 42.

<sup>70</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 35.

<sup>71</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 54.

<sup>72</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 40.

her corrupted personality, and this corrupted personality stems from her inappropriate black-coded sexuality and her use of Obeah.

Like Annie Palmer, both Millicent and Rachael Bogle initially appear to exist outside of de Lisser's Manichean binaries. Both of these young black women, despite some perceived faults from their Jamaican upbringing, which both Rutherford and Dick Carlton patronizingly try to correct, are depicted as good at heart. However, their goodness is almost entirely driven by their amorous attraction to white men and the affection those white men have in return. Indeed, their most honorable acts are done in service to those men. Rachael Bogle, for instance, repeatedly visits Aspley, the Carlton's plantation, to relay information to the Carltons about the pending revolt. She also stops Dick on the road to Morant Bay to warn him of the revolt ahead, refuses to participate in bloodshed, and even shows great concern over the white women at Aspley who had previously wronged her.<sup>73</sup> However, it is clear that her motivation is not merely good will, but her love for Dick, as she demonstrates by her "bitter consuming jealousy" of Joyce and by looking at Dick with "eyes with an expression the meaning of which was not dubious."<sup>74</sup> Thus, the morality of these characters does not appear to arise from their own values, but from their association with and influence by white male characters.

The fact that these black women's moral compasses stem from their association with white men is shown, especially, to be true by the extremely bitter and violent thoughts they have when spurned by the white men they love. After Dick Carlton spurns Rachael Bogle, for instance, de Lisser notes "her resemblance to her father was strong at that moment" and that "She knew... that something was to be done to strike a great blow at them [white people], and

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<sup>73</sup> De Lisser, "Days of Terror," 13 Jan. 1914: 17.

<sup>74</sup> De Lisser, "Days of Terror," 3 Jan. 1914: 17.

for the first time she rejoiced in this knowledge.”<sup>75</sup> This shows that Rachael has a generalizing vindictive side held at bay only by her affection for and loyalty to Dick. Likewise, Millicent returns to her grandfather’s house after being spurned by Rutherford and threatened by Annie Palmer. It is here, rather than under Rutherford’s influence, that she adopts with full fervor her belief in Obeah that allegedly causes her death. These characters, then, represent the targets of the colonial civilizing mission that de Lisser believed in: by their association with white people, they are considered at least partially redeemed from their status as natives.

Both of these young black women are also considered more civilized because they are of middle and rising class. Millicent feels she is able to oppose Annie Palmer largely because she is “free and educated and her grandfather [is] a man of wealth and power.” Similarly, Millicent thinks “servants had always regarded her with a certain sort of respect because of her father. Like all her class, Rachael feared ridicule keenly; to be made a mock of... the thought cut her to the quick.”<sup>76</sup> Certainly, the superior class status of these young women is why white characters in the novel treat them with more respect than black characters of low class status. However, unlike other imperialists at the time, de Lisser does not appear to think that differences between black and white people were solely a matter of class.<sup>77</sup> After all, Millicent and Rachael retain fatal flaws as a result of their native heritage that are not erased by their class privilege. In fact, taking such pride in their class status actually appears to harm both of these women. If Millicent had not so boldly stood up to Annie Palmer, driven by her assurance in her grandfather and her education, she would likely not have been cursed. Likewise, it is Millicent’s connection to her father’s renown that makes accusations against her more credible, and one of the reasons why

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<sup>75</sup> De Lisser, “Days of Terror,” 3 Jan. 1914: 17.

<sup>76</sup> De Lisser, “Days of Terror,” 3 Jan. 1914: 17.

<sup>77</sup> For an example of an imperial reformer who believed that education and class were the only things separating black West Indians from white West Indians, consult John Jacob Thomas, *Froudacity*.

they result in her execution. Thus, de Lisser's native characters cannot be fully redeemed by class status.

Even the white male influence and values that these women adopt do not end up saving either character's life. These young women still die by the end of each novel. Even more significantly, they are killed because of native values: both their own and that of others. Millicent's fatal flaw is her belief in Obeah. Although she is apparently cursed by Annie Palmer, Rutherford and Rider theorize her affliction is "nothing real; only something imagined," and she is only killed by it because of the force of her own psychology.<sup>78</sup> Thus, it is not only Annie's corrupted spirituality that kills Millicent, but her own. Likewise, Rachael Bogle is killed by a black man and her own native traits rather than a failing of white society. She is convicted of striking Dick Carlton in the head with a stone (and apparently murdering him) during the attacks on Morant Bay. In reality, Raines, a black maroon, threw the rock at Carlton. However, the blame for this miscarriage of justice is not laid on the white judges. Instead, it is diverted onto Raines, who vindictively accuses her of the crime and rigs the trial in his favor. Additionally, it is Rachael's violently emotional responses that ensure her defeat. During the trial the judges "asked Rachael what was her defense. She looked at them for a moment in silence, then fell into a fit of hysterical raving."<sup>79</sup> Thus, her inability to access the level-headed rationality attributed to white people is ultimately what causes her downfall. In this way, like Annie Palmer, both Rachael and Millicent are unable to escape corruption by the native, no matter how civilized they have become by their association with white men and their middle class status.

In the end, then, de Lisser's novels have little real hope in the civilizing mission. Rather, de Lisser's novels fall in line with Fanon's argument that colonists saw natives as "the negation"

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<sup>78</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 235.

<sup>79</sup> De Lisser, "Days of Terror," 17 Jan. 1914: 20.

rather than “absence of value,” and that this fact made them corrupting influences as well as extremely difficult, if not impossible, to educate or truly change. In *The White Witch of Rosehall* and *Revenge: A Tale of Old Jamaica*, white people who interact closely with natives are corrupted by native values. Even those black characters who accept colonial interpretations of what is good end up dead by the end of each novel because of their own native affiliation and the native values of others. By the end of the each novel, all three anomalies to de Lisser’s Manichean binary are first shown to actually be in line with de Lisser’s Manichean imperial views, and then killed, making way for an easy binary world in which imperialism can save the day by eliminating native threats.

### **Native Rebellion: De Lisser’s depiction of the Baptist War and Morant Bay Rebellion**

After solidifying his Manichean equations through presentation of religion and even seemingly anomalous characters, de Lisser moves on to his presentation of black rebellions. By this point, de Lisser is already set up to demonize black rebels and valorize the decisions of white characters. By doing so, he sought to discredit historical black rebellions and promote the established order in both past and present. He thereby sought to influence his audience in favor of continued imperial control. He demonizes black rebellion by depicting both Takoo and Bogle as rebel leaders with selfish motives, rather than truly believing in a liberation struggle. He then shows that followers of rebellion are controlled by emotion rather than thought. This puts them, as Fanon points out, on the same level as animals.<sup>80</sup> After making dehumanizing moves against black rebels, de Lisser is able to portray even his white imperial characters’ most despicable instincts and violent behaviors as justified. Even so, he repeatedly removes or lessens the responsibility of white imperialists for bloodshed, portraying them as reasoned and moral.

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<sup>80</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 42.

Both Takoo and Paul Bogle have selfish motives for starting rebellions in de Lisser's novels. This is a clear construction by de Lisser meant to uphold his imperialistic aims, as even cursory historical research does not reflect this stance. For instance, there are no records indicating that the Baptist War was led by Obeah practitioners on missions of solely personal vendetta, and ample records indicating the importance of Christian missions and Native Baptist churches in organizing a coordinated rebellion meant to force white planters to grant enslaved people emancipation.<sup>81</sup> While Paul Bogle was a real Baptist preacher from Stony Gut, a predominantly black community close to Morant Bay, he resorted to violent rebellion only after exploring many other avenues as a long-time advocate of racial justice, counter to de Lisser's selfish and ambitious portrayal of him. He protested along with his community the unjust detention of a poor black man for "trespassing" on a long-abandoned plantation several days before the Morant Bay Rebellion and remained an advocate and leader of nonviolent protest at least until police attempted to arrest him and several other protest leaders for their nonviolent acts. It was only after this final act of police aggression that Bogle led a group of armed rebels to Morant Bay where they clashed with a hastily formed militia.<sup>82</sup>

In de Lisser's novels, none of these calculated or liberation-based motives for rebellion are discussed. Rather, both Bogle and Takoo act emotionally and for personal gain. Takoo's motive could only be revenge for Millicent's death, as he was on cozy enough terms with Annie Palmer to aid her in murdering her first husband before the events of the novel.<sup>83</sup> Thus, he clearly does not care about black liberation or Annie's cruelty to her slaves, merely retribution for his own granddaughter's death. Takoo is thus locked in "what Fanon describes as the tragic

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<sup>81</sup> Reckord, 111-112.

<sup>82</sup> Cavanaugh, "The Cause of the Morant Bay Rebellion: 1865."

<sup>83</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 219.

mythology of colonial society, one in which the negro will never truly dismantle the status-quo – the dominance of whites over blacks – because the black lacks the will and inclination to transcend the futility of reactive violence.”<sup>84</sup> Likewise, in *Revenge*, Bogle does not truly care about the continued domination of the white planter class over black laborers; instead, he is power-hungry, as de Lisser plainly states: “Put to the test, Bogle would rather have abandoned any schemes he might have had than have shared his authority with any other man. The subordination of himself to any cause whatever would have seemed preposterous to him.”<sup>85</sup> As neither of these revolts are true liberation struggles, then, they are not only corrupt from the beginning, but doomed to fail, as neither leader is willing to consider the needs of the revolt before their own desires.

Neither are the supporters of the revolt depicted in a noble light. Rather, they are shown as almost entirely driven by emotion, both irrational bloodthirstiness and cowardice, depending on the situation. As already argued, Rachael Bogle is controlled primarily by her emotions, showing that this is a native trait to de Lisser, not one specific to revolutionaries. Nonetheless, it is used to discredit black revolutions. Takoo’s followers, for example, are drunk for the entire attack on Rose Hall, but they are “apprehensive, half drunk though he [Takoo] had made them. Sober, they would have never faced Mrs Palmer.”<sup>86</sup> All these black men appear to lack resolve, and are only willing to follow Takoo’s orders because he intoxicated them. Likewise, Bogle’s followers respond to a man being shot with “a dampening influence upon the insurgents' ardour. They had come prepared for an easy victory.”<sup>87</sup> This stands in sharp contrast to the beginning of the revolt when Bogle and his followers were “drunk with blood and fury, and transformed now

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<sup>84</sup> Dawes, “An Act of “Unruly Savagery,”” 2.

<sup>85</sup> De Lisser, “Days of Terror,” 3 Jan. 1914: 17.

<sup>86</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 252.

<sup>87</sup> De Lisser, “Days of Terror,” 13 Jan. 1914: 20.

out of all semblance to a human.”<sup>88</sup> This transformation out of humanity by emotions clearly indicates that de Lisser views these revolutionaries on the same level as animals. This is made even more explicit in *The White Witch of Rosehall* when Rutherford and Rider watch the Christmas costumed celebrations of slaves on Rose Hall plantation. Two revelers in particular “got themselves up as animals” and it is these two Rutherford focuses on.<sup>89</sup> Although these disguises are portrayed as a holiday tradition, de Lisser clearly intended these costumes to represent both the disguised intentions of rebels and some facet of their animalistic inner being.

The way that de Lisser discusses black rebels stands in sharp contrast to the way that he discusses white counter-rebels. Indeed, he portrays even historically brutal white reactionaries in a favorable light. For example, John Eyre, governor of Jamaica during the Morant Bay Rebellion, was widely blamed for mismanaging the crackdown on Morant Bay which ended in the indiscriminate death of many black inhabitants, whether they were involved in the revolt or not.<sup>90</sup> However, de Lisser portrays him as a compassionate and level headed individual, saying only that “One question obsessed his mind. Would the relief he had sent arrive in time?”<sup>91</sup> This depiction of Eyre shows him as a governor merely concerned with the safety of innocent citizens, not someone with willful apathy or active hatred towards black people. Likewise, as already explored, de Lisser depicts the mismanagement of trials during the rebellion as largely the fault of black actors rather than the fault of the white judges.

In addition, despite Annie’s clear moral depravity and her close association with native values, it is still her whiteness which ultimately matters to Rutherford and society at large in the context of revolt. Millicent’s death prompts no direct legal action. Rutherford does threaten to

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<sup>88</sup> De Lisser, “Days of Terror,” 10 Jan. 1914: 20.

<sup>89</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 187.

<sup>90</sup> Heuman, *The Killing Time: The Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica*.

<sup>91</sup> De Lisser, “Days of Terror,” 10 Jan. 1914: 20.

lay Obeah and murder charges on Annie Palmer if she does not save Millicent; however, since he states, “I shall urge that an inquiry be made into the death of your husbands,” it is clear that, while his action may be prompted by Millicent, it truly addresses her murder of white, rich men.<sup>92</sup> Rutherford likely makes this threat because he realizes society would take the life of a young black woman into little account. However, Rutherford is proven to be implicated in this mindset as well by the end of the novel. When Annie is murdered by Takoo de Lisser writes:

“Outraged pride of race animated him; he was a white man struggling for the life of a white woman. . . . And what Robert, burningly raged against—the indignity, the enormity, of this besetting of a white woman by her slaves, this impending hideous execution or murder of her by them, Rider also felt in full. The very idea was monstrous, atrocious. It mattered nothing what she had done, it was not for these men rudely to handle her and slay her. It was the duty of every white man on the estate to stand by her in this deadly hour of peril.”

Some have argued that this is, in fact, supposed to be a critique of Rutherford. However, this claim is difficult to support because the audience is repeatedly encouraged to identify with Rutherford. De Lisser most often adopts his point of view, especially in situations where he is observing others. He thus puts the audience in the position of the watcher, the foreigner, rather than the rebellious actor, the native.<sup>93</sup> Nor does de Lisser encourage identification with black characters other than Millicent, who is, at this point in the novel, already dead. The only other black character described in detail rather than presented in a mass of indistinct black faces, is Takoo, and he is unambiguously fearsome. Thus, de Lisser seems to be encouraging audience identification with this white “pride of race,” or, at the very least, arguing that Rutherford’s feelings are excusable.

Indeed, Rutherford’s society agrees with him, and Annie Palmer’s death sparks a total crackdown on the black population to quell the rebellion. This stands in sharp contrast to the lack

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<sup>92</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 219.

<sup>93</sup> Dawes, “An Act of “Unruly” Savagery,” 3.

of attention the plantocracy gives Millicent's death. Rutherford's participation in this crackdown is depicted as honorable, as he revenges both Annie Palmer and Rider, who also dies at the beginning of the rebellion and is mourned as "kindly, cultured, understanding."<sup>94</sup> Rather than depicting his violent involvement as bloody savagery like Takoo, de Lisser depicts Rutherford's counter-rebellion involvement merely by saying "the call now was for men to put down the rebellion and Robert offered his services."<sup>95</sup> Even the passive voice of this section makes it impossible to tell who was doing the calling, thus completely diverting any blame for this call to arms onto an anonymous person. This gap in description, depicting Takoo and the rebellion in graphic, horrific, active detail, and Rutherford and the crackdown in cool, passive minimalism, shows de Lisser's clear support of imperialists, even in the case of enslaved people revolting against a system de Lisser himself acknowledges as unjust.

The Manichean allegory de Lisser sets up early in the novel, then, serves his purpose of portraying black rebellion as unambiguously unjust and violent while portraying imperial crackdowns as just and absolving white people of responsibility for violence. De Lisser likely found this argument compelling enough to use it as the basis for two novels because he saw similarities between the 1831 and 1865 rebellions and the religious revivalist anti-imperialists of his own time. That de Lisser was attempting to draw parallels between rebellions is even displayed in the extremely similar plots of the two novels. He thus sought to garner support for his imperial cause through depictions of past revolts to comment on his present moment.

### **The Self-Defeating Nature of de Lisser's Imperialism**

Despite de Lisser's aim to present Manichean arguments for imperialism, he is only partially successful in actually presenting a viable case for an imperial society. In some aspects,

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<sup>94</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 260.

<sup>95</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 261.

his imperial society is entirely self-defeating. *Revenge* presents an imperial society that, while still extremely problematic, at least presents some hope for a civilizing mission and the continuance of imperialism as a way of life for white colonists. *The White Witch of Rosehall*, on the other hand, presents a society that has no viability. In this novel, the civilizing mission is proven to be impossible, not just unlikely, and no white person in the novel can remain in Jamaica without being corrupted by the native. In this way, imperial society not only shamelessly exploits the native, but it is not truly beneficial for colonists, either. De Lisser's own case for imperialism, then, even only taking into account the benefit of the colonizer, is weak at best and completely self-defeating at worst.

*Revenge: A Tale of Old Jamaica* presents a society in which imperial order temporarily breaks down, but like in *The White Witch of Rosehall*, this order is reinstated and, in fact, strengthened by the end of the novel. De Lisser explicitly states that while "two weeks ago... anarchy had reigned triumphant for a brief space... [but] the scene had changed... and every rebel and malcontent had learnt that what they had thought was the Government's weakness was only strength disguised."<sup>96</sup> Unlike *The White Witch of Rosehall*, however, this imperial society seems to be undergoing a successful process of civilizing the native. Colonist characters have faith in that mission even at the end of the novel. The failures of imperialism, then, comes down to the failings of individuals rather than the system. Several black servants at Aspley plantation, for instance, refuse to participate in rebellion and are presented in a favorable light, though they are presented as still less civilized than white people. Mother Charlotte and Roberts, for instance, protect the white women of Aspley from the rebels until they can escape, and few laborers at Aspley join the rebellion. Nonetheless, Mother Charlotte is still referred to as coming "from a

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<sup>96</sup> De Lisser, "Days of Terror," 20 Jan. 1914: 17.

war-like stock which, in the gloomy death-haunted woods of Africa, had held human life to be of little account” and chuckles “gleefully” over ammunition.<sup>97</sup> Clearly, then, while de Lisser nonetheless views the black characters as less civilized and more violent than the white characters, black characters with closer proximity to white characters in *Revenge* are less likely to be involved in acts of excessive violence such as the Morant Bay rebellion.

Additionally, Rachael Bogle, a prime subject for the civilizing mission, is only murdered by the end of the novel because white colonists are depicted letting petty jealousy get in the way of their civilizing duty. Dick Carlton promises to let Rachael stay on Aspley plantation if she does not feel safe in Stony Gut., early in the novel, Mrs. Carlton offers to bring Rachael to England with her and Joyce, presumably Likewise as a servant. However, when Rachael appears on Aspley later in the novel requesting such asylum, she is denied because Joyce has learned of Rachael’s feelings for Dick and responds jealously. Thus, Dick offers only to help her if she “want[s] to go to Morant Bay,” but otherwise says “it would be best for you not to come to Aspley any more.”<sup>98</sup> Rachael then resentfully returns to Stony Gut, where she is eventually captured, tried, and killed. Thus, Rachael’s damnation appears not to be a product of the imperial society itself but a perfect storm of betrayal and the failure of colonists to put their own feelings aside for the sake of the civilizing mission.

Indeed, even the rebellion itself seems to be spurred by lack of oversight by local officials rather than systemic problems. For instance, Mr. Burton, a Morant Bay official, only agrees to “have Bogle and his associates arrested on Monday” after prodding from other white men at a dinner party.<sup>99</sup> He is shown caring considerably more about the mood of his guests than local

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<sup>97</sup> De Lisser, “Days of Terror,” 13 Jan. 1914: 20.

<sup>98</sup> De Lisser, “Days of Terror,” 3 Jan. 1914: 17.

<sup>99</sup> De Lisser, “Days of Terror” 6 Jan. 1914: 17.

political affairs. Burton's sluggishness notifying the governor of possible revolt also results in the death of those at Morant Bay. Since dire consequences often result from white negligence rather than systematic failings, de Lisser seems to advocate for tighter imperial control of natives and greater education measures presided over by colonizers.

De Lisser also does not shy away from the idea that the civilizing process might be violent. In *Revenge*, he praises Governor Eyre and his government officials' handling of the Morant Bay Rebellion. This crackdown, of course, historically claimed many black lives and, even in de Lisser's depiction, "many men had been hanged and shot after the briefest of trials."<sup>100</sup> Nonetheless, de Lisser seems to be willing to bite the bullet and accept that many black lives may be ruined or ended in service of the imperial mission for the benefit of colonizers. Additionally he seems to believe imperialism would benefit even the native after the completion of the civilizing mission.

Finally, in *Revenge*, de Lisser's colonist characters plan to depart for England for a brief respite while the colonial government is rebuilt, but they plan to return to Jamaica because, as Mr. Carlton, Dick Carlton's father, thinks, "In spite of everything, his heart was still in the country where he had spent all his life."<sup>101</sup> Their confidence in the resilience of the country for colonists seems to be supported by the reformation of the colonial government in which "changes have taken place, what changes! The House of Assembly is gone, the magistrates are all to go; everything, they say is to be different from what it has been."<sup>102</sup> Thus, in *Revenge: A Tale of Old Jamaica*, while civilizing Jamaica seems to be an uphill battle, de Lisser retains hope

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<sup>100</sup> De Lisser, "Days of Terror," 17 Jan. 1914: 20.

<sup>101</sup> De Lisser, "Days of Terror," 20 Jan. 1914: 17.

<sup>102</sup> De Lisser, "Days of Terror," 20 Jan. 1914: 17.

that natives could, with great vigilance, be made like British people. Nonetheless, this “only com[es]... after the shedding of blood” and great effort, even generations of effort.<sup>103</sup>

This hope for the imperial mission is not present in *The White Witch of Rosehall*. In this novel, the civilizing mission is not only difficult but impossible. Only one black character, Millicent, seems redeemable by de Lisser’s standards, but, as already explored, even she falls into a Manichean trap: she continues to believe in Obeah until her death. This is despite Rutherford’s attempts to convince her that she is engaging in harmful superstition. In this way, even though Rutherford visits Millicent multiple times, he still fails in his civilizing mission. It is not his failing, then, but the failing of imperialism itself that are unable to save Millicent’s life.

Imperialism in *The White Witch of Rosehall* does not appear to be truly beneficial for colonizers, either. While Annie Palmer certainly gains power, wealth, and status through running a plantation, she sacrifices her morality in doing so. As already explored, this is because natives in *The White Witch of Rosehall* are an extremely corrupting influence. Rutherford, too, falls prey to the “West Indian ethos.” He drinks excessively, engages in “improper” premarital sex, and becomes lazy. Even Rider, the arguable moral center of the novel, cannot help but be corrupted. Despite the fact that Rider was a “curate in the Kingston Parish church,” the very face of the civilizing mission, he “would probably have been its rector another five years but for his predilection for drink.”<sup>104</sup> His alcoholism haunts him throughout the novel, and he explains to Rutherford that “fear is the very texture of the mind of all the white people here; fear and boredom and sometimes disgust. That is why so many of us drink.”<sup>105</sup> Clearly, then, the fearful and corrupting influence of the native has a degenerative moral quality on the minds of colonists

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<sup>103</sup> De Lisser, “Days of Terror,” 20 Jan. 1914: 17.

<sup>104</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 91-92.

<sup>105</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 182.

in *The White Witch of Rosehall*. Only Rutherford is able to escape corruption by leaving Jamaica. Unlike in *Revenge*, Rutherford leaves for England with no intention of returning to the British West Indies. In fact, the very last line of the book is “‘Do you think you will ever come back to the West Indies?’ asked the old parson, by way of saying something. ‘Never,’ was the reply.”<sup>106</sup> This expresses very little faith in the colonial mission in Jamaica. In this novel, it has degenerated to such an immoral state that no British people are able to stay there without becoming disgusted and disillusioned.

Thus, while *Revenge: A Tale of Old Jamaica* provides at least some hope for the imperial mission, even if that mission includes high levels of violence, *The White Witch of Rosehall* is entirely self-defeating. In *The White Witch of Rosehall* the native corrupts everything s/he comes into contact with so the imperial mission’s stated object of civilizing cannot function. In this way, de Lisser’s novel attempts to make an imperial argument but ultimately exposes the disingenuous nature of imperialism that uses civilizing as a convenient excuse but is ultimately just focused on exploitation. This is revealed even in his more successful argument for imperialism because, in *Revenge: A Tale of Old Jamaica*, it is clear that even if the imperial mission were ultimately to succeed, it would only do so after many generations of occupation. Thus, under de Lisser’s ideology, the British would have an excuse to remain in Jamaica as long as would be economically and politically useful, always claiming to have more civilizing to do.

## Conclusion

De Lisser’s novels are perfect examples of the difficulty of writing coherent colonialist fiction. To discredit black rebellions and native institutions, colonizers almost always portrayed natives and colonists in Manichean terms. This enabled them to succeed in their mission of

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<sup>106</sup> De Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, 261.

rewriting rebellions to discredit black actors and expunge the guilt of white colonists. After resorting to Manicheanism, however, it was then incredibly difficult for colonialist authors to lay claim to a simplistic civilizing mission. After all, if natives represented the polar opposite of their values rather than the mere absence of them, then natives were necessarily corrupting and difficult if not impossible to teach. Thus, the civilizing mission would be futile. Indeed, it was not in the best interest of colonialist authors to write about the success of a civilizing mission, since glorifying white characters necessarily depended on demonizing black characters in their Manichean model. While this may seem like a problem for colonialist authors because it made the civilizing mission seem prohibitively difficult, it in fact served their covert aims of continued exploitation and tighter control of colonies by necessitating that colonial occupation last an exceptionally long time to complete their attempts to civilize the native, or, at least, to quell the corrupting influence of natives.

The internal inconsistencies in de Lisser's colonialist fiction likely went unchallenged by his contemporaries as de Lisser wrote for extremely sympathetic audiences. Indeed, he originally published *The White Witch of Rosehall* in *Planter's Punch*, a magazine of his own creation that served as the unofficial reading material for the Jamaican Imperial Association.<sup>107</sup> The fact that de Lisser was writing for a specific, imperial audience explains much about why his works have had little staying power. With the liberation of many former British colonies, including Jamaica, his colonialist arguments often seem defunct to postmodern audiences. Although de Lisser has been lauded as the "first important novelist of the English-speaking Caribbean," only *The White Witch of Rosehall* is now widely read, and much of that novel's popularity is due to Rose Hall tourism, a neocolonial institution itself.<sup>108</sup> In addition, de Lisser writes in a Victorian gothic style

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<sup>107</sup> Birbalsingh, "H. G. De Lisser," 145.

<sup>108</sup> Birbalsingh, "H.G. De Lisser," 142; Lomas, "Mystifying Mystery," 80-82.

that often seems tortured and hyper-sensational to postmodern audiences.<sup>109</sup> Indeed, de Lisser's audience was not only time-specific, but specific to Jamaica. Claims that his works saw wide popularity in England were almost certainly exaggerated.<sup>110</sup> This is especially accurate for *Revenge: A Tale of Old Jamaica*, which was printed in very few formal volumes, reputedly only for de Lisser and a few friends. The novel saw most of its distribution through its serialized edition in the *Kingston Daily Gleaner* as *Days of Terror: A Dramatic Novel*, meaning that the novel was almost exclusively read by Jamaicans at the time of its initial release.

The fact that de Lisser so strongly espoused these imperialistic and racist views to his sympathetic local contemporaries is somewhat complicated by the fact that de Lisser was, himself, mixed race and middle class rather than of the dominant racial and economic class. Indeed, his life and publication history outside of and including *The White Witch of Rosehall* and *Revenge: A Tale of Old Jamaica* indicate changing and somewhat conflicted views surrounding race and class, despite his unwavering belief in imperial society. During his young life when he was hailed as an idealistic Fabian socialist, he wrote *Susan Proudleigh* and *Jane's Career*, novels with strong black female protagonists who exposed the hypocrisy of Jamaican society. During these times he absolutely still supported British rule of Jamaica and wrote his original draft of *Revenge: A Tale of Old Jamaica*. However, his well-rounded portrayals of black women in *Susan Proudleigh* and *Jane's Career* indicate that he had not yet totally accepted the Manichean ideology of his contemporaries. During this period in de Lisser's life, he seemed to hold a mixture of conservative and liberal political views, perhaps considering himself to be an imperial reformer. By the time he wrote *The White Witch of Rosehall*, however, he had become "an arch-

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<sup>109</sup> Struselis, "Postcolonial Ghosts in the Caribbean," 97-106.

<sup>110</sup> Birbalsingh, "H.G. De Lisser," 144.

conservative who opposed universal suffrage and Jamaican independence,” in line with the views of his peers.<sup>111</sup>

Without access to de Lisser’s personal writings, it is impossible to know how he reconciled the racist colonialist ideology he espoused with his own racial identity. De Lisser may have tried to pass as white or may, indeed, have seen himself as white. Even if he considered himself mixed race, he may have still thought of himself as racially superior to black Jamaicans. More charitably, perhaps he saw himself as the hope of the civilizing mission he espoused. Whatever the case, de Lisser’s identity has been difficult for theorists to reconcile with his works and also pits him in direct opposition to the mainly postcolonial and anti-racist traditions of Jamaican literature. This uncomfortable truth may be another reason his works have received such little attention up until this point.

Certainly, his position as a “native” colonialist author makes de Lisser difficult to fit into an easy binary of colonist versus native. This, though, is arguably why studying de Lisser is so important. His works emphasize how deeply ingrained racism was in the fabric of imperial thought and, indeed in Jamaican society as a whole less than a century ago. Not even a man of mixed race who showed himself more than capable of presenting fully developed, capable black characters could make an imperial argument without resorting to racist Manicheanism, particularly in cases as racially charged as anti-imperial black rebellions. In *The White Witch of Rosehall* and *Revenge: A Tale of Old Jamaica*, then, de Lisser particularly exposes the absolute inseparability of the ideology of imperialism and racism.

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<sup>111</sup> Ramchand, *The West Indian Novel and its Background*, 57.

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