"Dabbling in Delicate Drugs": Aristocracy, Darwinism, and Substance Abuse in M. P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud*

by Abigail Boucher

Abstract: M. P. Shiel's post-apocalyptic novel, *The Purple Cloud* (1901), offers Darwinian commentary on the suitability of upper-class socio-political rule, depicting the aristocracy's struggles for basic survival despite their privilege and supposedly superior breeding. Through characters' recreational use of narcotics, Shiel interrogates "survival of the fittest," adaptability, sexual selection, and hierarchies in the animal world as they are perverted by human class structures. For Shiel, class is a product of luck or chance: aristocracy largely results from the right bodies existing in the right environment at the right time. This discussion triangulates Shiel's thorny points of substance abuse, survival, and class and, in that triangulation, finds a more cohesive if pessimistic argument regarding the role of luck in the origins and future of humanity, and in the class structures that organize society.

Keywords: Shiel, *The Purple Cloud*, substance abuse, addiction, long nineteenth century, post-apocalyptic fiction, class studies, Darwinism, evolution, aristocracy, medicine and science in literature

Introduction

In M. P. Shiel's post-apocalyptic novel, *The Purple Cloud* (1901), protagonist Adam Jeffson accidentally releases a toxic cloud of purple gas upon the world, leaving him the only person alive. Jeffson goes mad and spends decades in a psychotropic stupor—often high and increasingly mentally ill—traveling the globe, burning cities to the ground, and declaring himself the world's emperor. Shiel offers Darwinian commentary on the suitability of upper-

class socio-political rule by depicting the aristocracy's struggles for basic survival despite the safety nets of their privilege and supposedly superior breeding. Through his characters' recreational use of narcotics, Shiel interrogates "survival of the fittest," adaptability, sexual selection, and hierarchies the animal world as they are perverted by human class structures. That Shiel himself was an avid drug user and prone to delusions of aristocratic grandeur further complicates his portrayal of Jeffson. To Shiel, class is a product of luck within nature. That Jeffson survives the —despite spending much of it dangerously high while participating in perilous, self-destructive adventures—represents Shiel's commentary on luck in a Darwinian universe. Jeffson's surreal binges lead him to find a mate and presumably father a new aristocratic race in an otherwise dead world, thus triangulating Shiel's thorny points of substance abuse, survival, and class into a more cohesive argument regarding the origins, and ultimate future, of humanity and its class structures.

In May 1818, Thomas de Quincey recorded in his autobiographical work (that would go on to become his 1821 *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*) the following laudanum-induced nightmare:

> comprehend the unimaginable horror … I brought together all creatures, birds, beasts, reptiles, all trees and plants, usages and appearances, that are found in all tropical regions, and assembled them together … I was stared at, hooted at, grinned at, chattered at, by monkeys, by parroquets, by cockatoos. I ran into pagodas, and was fixed for centuries at the summit or in secret rooms: I was the idol; I was the priest; I was worshipped; I was sacrificed … I was buried for a thousand years in stone coffins, with mummies and sphynxes, in narrow chambers at the heart of eternal pyramids. I was kissed, with cancerous kisses, by

> crocodiles; and laid, confounded with all unutterable slimy things,
>
> amongst reeds and Nilotic mud. (*Confessions* 191-92)

De Quincey's overlap of time, orientalism, religion, and human hierarchy within the natural world is tangled. This ominous imagery is more frequently associated with *fin de siècle* preoccupations: Darwinism, religion, late British imperialism, and the development of apocalyptic fiction—all elements in a collective anxiety at which Max Nordau famously scoffed in the beginning of his 1892 *Degeneration*.[1] However, De Quincey's quotation illustrates that the later development of *fin de siècle* apocalyptic literature reinvigorated concerns rooted, appropriately, much farther back in human history; his text looks both forward and backward. Given apocalyptic fiction's narrative propensity for portraying echoes of the past in visions of the future, it is perhaps apt that the genre itself, intentionally or otherwise, finds itself in the late nineteenth century echoing the late eighteenth century's engagement with geology, evolution, classification systems, and earlier waves of British imperialism. Writing at the *fin de siècle*, biologist Thomas Henry Huxley in his essay 'On the Method of Zadig' (1880) advocates for science to be used as both a forward-looking and retrospective prophetic tool, positing that science always does (and must) work backward in order to understand the future.[2] While reverberations of De Quincey's hallucinogenic stretching of time, classification systems within nature, religious ambivalence, and orientalist discourse are found in much *fin de siècle* literature, and in post-apocalyptic literature generally, his evolutionary, psychotropic dream finds special resonance in Shiel's drug-addled post-apocalyptic novel, *The Purple Cloud*.

The Purple Cloud is an unusual text by any metric—even in terms of the genre groupings to which the novel unambiguously belongs: post-apocalyptic, *fin de siècle*, or

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[1] See Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (New York: D. Appleton, 1895). Also, Michael R. Page's *The Literary Imagination from Erasmus Darwin to H.G. Wells* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012); John Fowles's "Introduction" in Jefferies, *After London* (Oxford: OUP, 1980); and Andrew Tate, *Apocalyptic Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

[2] See Huxley, "On the Method of Zadig" (*Collected Essays* V. 4: *Science and Hebrew Tradition*. Cambridge: CUP, 2011).

Darwinian, for example. One of the novel's more notable features, especially when compared to others in its cohort, is a facet of Darwinian thought which is uncommon in literary representation of the time: the role that chance plays in the world of survival. Most popular culture of this or, indeed, any period which engages with the works of Charles Darwin tends to emphasize the more overtly competitive elements involved in the origin and development of species. Sexual selection and Darwin's concept (via Herbert Spencer) of "survival of the fittest" in the most directly combative sense are often central in these works, especially in terms of class origins in human social and natural history. Shiel's work departs from this focus by interrogating and expanding a much smaller element of "survival of the fittest"; as Darwin states, "we are apt to look at progress as the normal rule in human society; but history refutes this … Progress seems to depend on *many concurrent favourable conditions*" (*Descent* 166-67; emphasis added). Unlike many other evolutionarily-engaged authors who portray society as either progressing or degenerating due to the competitive nature of human development, Shiel offers a society that is far more ambiguous and providentially contingent. That is, every step forward a character takes in terms of human progress could also be read as a potential step backward; and *all* of these steps rely on luck, on "many concurrent favourable conditions." Shiel narrows his focus to tie together the origins of a class system within the natural world, the role that fortuitousness plays in Darwin's theories, and how both can be exemplified (echoing De Quincey) through the time- and ability-bending trope of substance abuse.

The Purple Cloud views the evolution of human class systems—interrogated by Shiel mostly through the aristocracy and, to a much lesser extent, the middle classes—as deriving from the alpha-dominance of the animal world, and largely dependent on chance. Like other class- and evolution-conscious post-apocalyptic authors before him, including H. G. Wells and Richard Jeffries, Shiel exhibits a fascination with "the extraordinary power of certain

items to endure"—in particular, class disparity and what it reveals about human origins (Zimmerman 97). As revealed by the dynamics of the novel and its original illustrations, *The Purple Cloud* ambivalently presents aristocracy as the product of human evolution in an uncaring Darwinian universe, in which the "fittest" survive and thrive because of random chance far more than intrinsic physiological merit. In keeping with the increasing Victorian and Edwardian ambiguity about the prospect of the future and the reality of human origin, which has been well explored by critics over the years, *The Purple Cloud* is itself cryptic about issues of class, the past, and the future.[3] Shiel indicates, especially through his representations of drug use which serve as the ultimate barometers of Darwinian luck, that aristocrats are nothing more than the right body in the right environment at the right time. In *The Purple Cloud*, it is through fortuitousness alone that various characters evolve or degenerate, ascend or descend the social ladder, avoid or succumb to addiction, recover or relapse, reach or squander their potential, and live or die.

Substance Abuse: Theory and Terminology

While Shiel's characters exhibit patterns of narcotic or alcohol consumption which adhere to many of the *DSM-5*'s criteria for substance use disorders,[4] this analysis does not seek to diagnose them as addicts, either by conventions of the day or by contemporary definitions. The reasons for this are twofold: first, Shiel's stance on and personal metrics of addiction are highly mutable, used for thematic and scientific purposes more complex than just an exploration of addiction *qua* addiction. Second, there are tensions in the contemporary medical community about the precise nature of diagnosis: how "abuse" and "dependence"

[3] Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plots* (Cambridge: CUP, 1983) is perhaps the ur-text on this subject. Tim Young's *Beastly Journeys: Travel and Transformation at the Fin de Siecle* (Oxford: OUP, 2013) looks at Darwinistic metaphor in this period in terms of ambiguity around transformation and evolution. See also Zimmerman on Victorian reception of more literal scientific realities, especially in terms of the development of new scientific disciplines like archaeology and geology.
[4] *DSM*'s criteria includes "hazardous use," "social / interpersonal problems related to use," "neglected major roles to use," "tolerance" "much time spent using," "physical / psychological problems related to use," and "activities given up to use."

should be diagnosed, if there is or should be a hierarchical distinction between them, and in which direction that hierarchy should go (Hasin 835). As these debates go well beyond the remit of this article, and as Shiel reframed nineteenth-century addiction discourse for his own thematic purposes, this article treats addiction and substance abuse differently from conventional approaches. The terminology used may be anachronistic to Shiel's work or may have overlap with other terminology ("addiction," "substance use / abuse," "dependence") for purposes of variety and grace.

Louise Foxcroft, in her 2016 *The Making of Addiction*, traces the interrelated but independent realms of cultural and medical understandings of addiction throughout the century:

> In the early nineteenth century the medical colonisation of opiates … did not seriously vilify the "luxurious" use of opium. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the "*habitué*" was damningly diagnosed as suffering from a form of mental illness, and the treatment meted out to such persons was inextricably bound up in disease rhetoric as well as in prevailing theories of degeneracy and deviancy. (3)

Race, of course, plays a major role in the period's addiction discourse, which Susan Zieger discusses at length in her 2008 *Inventing the Addict*. As will be explained below, this article will focus purely on twining together Shiel's threads of evolution, class lineage, and substance abuse. However difficult those threads are to disentangle from Shiel's equally knotty racial and orientalist rhetoric, the aim here is to look at less frequently analysed elements of *The Purple Cloud* than its often-cited racist imagery.

Shiel was clearly aware of the period's shifting socio-medical understanding of substance use and addiction, especially, as Foxcroft illustrates, in their relation to conceptions of class, mental illness, and degeneracy. Notably, the text—although deeply preoccupied with

and disturbed by all of these issues—takes no firm stance on any of them; by instead offering an ouroboros of vacillation, double standards, and ambiguity, it serves as a metacommentary on the nature of contemporary sociological, medical, and scientific anxiety. Shiel's use of substance abuse and addiction is often metaphorical, or at least darkly playful as it overlaps with issues highlighted nearly a century earlier by De Quincey, here compounded by more explicit *fin de siècle* questions of evolution and human or class origins. This sense of circular disharmony is picked apart by Susan Zieger's interrogation of "the curiously recursive loop" at the heart of the common definition of addiction: "the compulsion and need to use a drug as a result of having used it in the past" (3). It is this sense of circular disharmony that sends Shiel down his anxious spiral of attempting to understand a class / human / addiction starting point, as well as its future—which are both perpetually based on an ambiguous and paradoxical past.

Shiel's definition and portrayal of addiction is inconsistent, predicated on whether a character dies or thrives as a result of substance use. His insensitivity toward those characters who die is initially surprising, given his protagonist's debatable status as an addict and Shiel's personal usage of "narcotics more potent than *Cannabis indica* [marijuana]" (Zieger xvii). That insensitivity could be read as an element of Jeffson's unreliable first-person narration, in which the double standards and mental gymnastics around substance abuse illustrate disintegrating mental health and self-awareness. The vagaries of Shiel's judgment could also indicate his mimicry of, and authorial elevation to, the cosmic level of judgment he depicts: that morality is flexible in a universe where only luck and survival hold any significance, and substance abuse is only worthy of scorn if it impacts one's survival. Indeed, Darwin said little about substance abuse and survival (despite his father's teetotaling and his grandfather's insistence on the hereditary effects of drinking), instead allowing the

implications of substance abuse to percolate through and inform his ideas without addressing them directly (*Autobiography* 18, 107).

This inconsistency of definition or moral judgment enables Shiel to approach addiction obliquely, or almost perpendicularly to contemporary definitions. Over the course of the nineteenth-century, addiction began to be understood as a medical issue, rather than a lack of willpower.[5] Shiel views it simultaneously as neither and as both, with addiction retroactively applied to an individual based on a colder, more evolutionary metric: whether they live or die as a result of substance use. Similarly, understandings of addiction as class-based practices (whether upper- or lower-) are here nullified, given Jeffson's own fluctuating class status.

The Purple Cloud: A Study in Drugs, Class, and Evolution

The Purple Cloud is as strange and philosophically byzantine as the life of the author himself.[6] The novel unfolds through relay narration, including one mesmerist who sees events uncertainly unfold either far into the future as the potential downfall of the human race, or far into the past, as the origin of the current world. The bulk of the narrative focuses on Adam Jeffson, a middle-class English doctor engaged to a debauched countess named Clodagh. When an eccentric millionaire announces a global competition awarding $175 million to the first man to stand at the North Pole, Countess Clodagh discovers that her nephew, Peter Peters, is to accompany a team of British explorers as the ship's doctor. Peter, addicted to the drug atropine, is poisoned by Clodagh, who disguises his death as accidental overdose, enabling her fiancé Jeffson to take Peter's place in the competition. After a tumultuous

[5] See *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders [DSM]*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1994 [176]); and Colman (1).
[6] See John Sutherland, "Introduction" (*The Purple Cloud.* London: Penguin, 2012); also Kirsten MacLeod, "M.P. Shiel and the Love of Pubescent Girls: The Other 'Love that Dare Not Speak Its Name"' (*English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 51:4 [2008]: 355-80).

journey, Jeffson—the only one of the cutthroat explorers to survive—reaches the North Pole, at which point a catastrophe of ambiguous origin takes place: a toxic purple cloud of gas circles the globe, killing all of humanity except Jeffson. In the ensuing chaos, Jeffson goes mad (aided by his excessive consumption of opium, marijuana, and alcohol), reinvents himself as an orientalist Emperor of Earth, and sails the world burning all major cities to the ground. Decades later, he discovers a feral young woman who also survived the toxic cloud; he teaches her language and social customs, and they uncertainly decide to repopulate the earth.

Given Shiel's well-documented internalized hostility toward his mixed-race background and the novel's deeply troubling orientalist discourse, *The Purple Cloud* is often read with a focus on colonial or racial dynamics.[7] These readings are inevitable, given that Shiel wrote other overtly racist and orientalist works, including *Prince Zaleski* (1895), *The Rajah's Sapphire* (1896), *The Yellow Danger* (1898), *The Yellow Wave* (1905), and *The Dragon* (1913). *The Purple Cloud* also exhibits a complex engagement with religion, through its sustained and problematized Garden of Eden allegory and through the figure of "the physician … being remade in the image of the 'barbarous' pagan priest" (Small 40). More significantly, Jeffson is plagued by vaguely defined, duelling metaphysical forces, the "White Power" and the "Black Power," a sort of clichéd angel and devil on each shoulder, guiding Jeffson's behavior. Although "White Power" and "Black Power" as ideological terms are anachronistic, primarily gaining formal traction as social movements in the 1960s-1970s, *The Purple Cloud* makes a clear association of whiteness (in all its forms) with forces of good and non-whiteness with forces of evil, providing a major intersection with religious and post-colonial readings. *The Purple Cloud* has also been given new critical traction in science fiction and ecocriticism realms, providing the novel (which was neither a critical nor popular

[7] See William L. Svitavsky's "From Decadence to Racial Antagonism: M.P. Shiel at the Turn of the Century" (*Science Fiction Studies* 31.1 [Spring 2004]: 1-24).

success) with analytical attention it never achieved during the first hundred years of its existence.[8]

But what has not yet been investigated at length is the prevalence of substance abuse in the novel, especially in relation to class and to the natural world. This critical lacuna is unusual, given the prominent status of drugs in the text and in many of the original serial illustrations by J. J. Cameron. For example, the title page itself (see Figure 1) shows a regally resplendent, orientalized Jeffson sitting alone in nature smoking a hookah, while the titular cloud in the shape of an anthropomorphized Death passes over the cityscape behind him.

[Figure 1 inserted here]

[Fig. 1] "The Purple Cloud Title Page"

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Cameron's illustrations, originally published in conjunction with Shiel's text, highlight and punctuate important moments in the novel; they also conspicuously engage with the thematic overlap of aristocracy, drug use, and Darwinism, further accentuating the surprising lack of critical engagement on these fronts.

Close-reading of Shiel's characters and their chosen substance(s) and positions in terms of class, survival, and drug use begins with the only who is most explicitly framed by Shiel as an addict: Peter.

Peter, Wilson, and Atropine

While Shiel frequently shows Jeffson drinking alcohol and smoking opium and marijuana from a first-person perspective, there is little discussion of the drugs' physical effects. But there is much attention paid, however, to the brief, early scenes of Peter's

[8] See Sutherland, "Introduction" (xxx-xxxi).

atropine use. An overview of atropine's history helps clarify what Shiel could have reliably known and what he altered for artistic purposes.

Today, a synthesized version of atropine belongs to the anti-muscarinic / anti-spasmodic class of drugs: it blocks a type of neurotransmitter receptor connected to heart rate. But the drug's ancient uses in surgical medicine, as a poison, and as a recreational drug long predate more recent understanding of it as an individual compound. Atropine occurs naturally in solanaceous plants like henbane, mandrake, jimson weed, and, perhaps most famously, deadly nightshade (also called belladonna)—all of which, in light of the novel's title, are purple in appearance: nightshade has a purple berry, henbane often has leaves with dark purple veins, and jimson weed and mandrake both have purple flowers. These plants were well-known as poisons—associated with mythical poisoners Medea, Circe, Hecate, and the deadliest of the Three Fates, worn in garlands by spectres on the River Styx, and a favorite of executioners. Henbane even makes a likely appearance in Shakespeare as "hebenon," the aurally-applied poison which kills King Hamlet (Act I, Scene V).[9]

Atropine also had a function in the medical world. The Ebers Papyrus, an Egyptian medical text c.1550 BC, lists solanaceous plants as an anti-spasmodic; Galen cited its use in dilating eyes. Its other major medical—and specifically surgical—uses were to regulate heart rate and as an anaesthetic or painkiller. The hallucinogenic properties of atropine-containing plants have just as long a lineage. Solanaceous plants fortified weak beer in the ancient world, enabled oracles to "speak to the gods," were thought in the Medieval period to be ritually inhaled by witches, and even form a psychedelic episode in Egyptian mythology,

[9] See "Atropine" (*The American Society of Health-System Pharmacists* https://www.drugs.com/monograph/atropine.html). See also Lee, MR "Solanaceae III: henbane, hags and Hawley Harvey Crippen" (*J R Coll Physicians Edinb* 36 [2006]: 366-73) and "Solanaceae IV: *Atropa belladonna*, Deadly Nightshade" (*J R Coll Physicians Edinb* 37 [2007]: 77-86); Harold Smulyan, "The Beat Goes On: The Story of Five Ageless Cardiac Drugs" (*The American Journal of the Medical Sciences* 356.5 [November 2018]: 441-50); and Jürgen L. Müller, "Love Potions and the Ointment of Witches: Historical Aspects of the Nightshade Alkaloids" (*Clinical Toxicology* 36:6 [1998]: 617-27).

when the god Re drugs the goddess Hathor with mandrake to stop her from exterminating humanity.

In 1831, atropine was isolated from deadly nightshade plants by German apothecary Heinrich F. G. Mein and was refined further over the course of the century. It was used to treat nerve damage, inflammation, muscle pain, breathing problems, and bacterial infections and was available in plasters and liniments that could be purchased over the counter at pharmacies. Its ready availability and multiple uses made it widely known to the public, not least because of several poisoning cases (usually accidental) that appeared in newspapers and medical journals.[10] Although atropine was used mostly for eye and heart surgery, Shiel's novel—about a toxic cloud that leads to mass casualties—coincidentally connects atropine to what would become only a few years later another of its medical applications: as an antidote to the nerve gases deployed in modern warfare.

The effects of atropine abuse are pithily summed up as "hot as a hare, blind as a bat, dry as a bone, red as a beet, and mad as a wet hen" (Goldsmith et.al 169-70). In *The Purple Cloud*, Peter's overdose symptoms, on the other hand, include "a semi-coma broken by passionate vomitings," followed by recurring "strong stomach pains [and] a fevered pulse" (Shiel 20-22). While atropine can cause a weak, rapid pulse, lethargy, and even coma in severe cases, these are rare. Khan, supporting Goldsmith, Frank, and Ungerleider's mnemonic description, reports that atropine abuse causes

> visual disturbances, xerostomia [dry mouth], mydriasis [eye dilation], and photophobia [light sensitivity]. Dysphagia [difficulty swallowing] and speech disturbances may also be present. The skin becomes dry and

[10] See "Curious Effects of Injected Atropine" (*The Glasgow Daily Herald* [Tuesday 10 Oct. 1865]: 3); "Atropine as Flavouring" (*Yorkshire Telegraph and Star* [Thursday 29 Jun. 1899]: 4); "Atropine Poisoning" (*The Islington Gazette* [28 Aug 1899]); "On Poisoning By the Sulphate of Atropine" (*Dublin Medical Press* [Wednesday 13 Nov. 1850]: 310); "Poisoning by the Endermic [sic] Use of Atropine" (*The Medical Press* [8 Feb. 1865]: 137-38); and "Atropine in Cholera" (*The Buckingham Express* [Saturday 8 July 1893]).

> hot, and a diffuse nonpunctate erythematous rash [i.e., without individual spots] may appear, especially over the face, neck, and chest. Confusion, incoordination, auditory and visual hallucinations, psychotic behaviour, and convulsions may also occur. (415)

While there are several potential reasons why Shiel included only one genuine symptom of atropine poisoning (Peter's semi-coma)—whether from ignorance, knowledge of an unusual individual case, narrative expediency, or poetic license for thematic coherence—his ultimate resistance to medical accuracy is as great as his apparent disdain for drug use. Peter's addiction is treated scornfully, as a marker of one whose indifference toward survival betrays the lucky conditions of his birth. Shiel here initially and surprisingly, given the trajectory of the novel, aligns himself with moralists who view addiction as issues of will and self-indulgence rather than illness. The aristocratic Peter does not hold in high regard his "fine vitality, which so fitted him for an Arctic expedition"; although he is himself a doctor, he rejects the advice of middle-class doctors, insisting his injection of the drug is "a mere flea-bite" (Shiel 20-22). Indeed, Shiel goes as far to say that it "is he [Peter] who has poisoned himself" (19). Given that the intended trip to the North Pole is ultimately littered with jostling alpha-males—all in direct competition with each other, all of whom die—Shiel calls into question through Peter's addiction his fitness as both a viable Darwinian specimen and as a suitable aristocratic leader of men.

Cameron's illustration of Peter's overdose [Figure 2] gives an unflattering Darwinian view of Peter, who lies still, diminutive, and vulnerable on the side of the frame. He is overwhelmed by enormous bed, canopy, bedclothes, and other creature comforts. A scarcely noticeable bearskin rug lies similarly splayed on the floor for others to trod on, depicted in the same color palette as Peter—two beings from the top of the chain, brought low. Peter is so diminished by his own luxuries, so demonstrably secure in his class superiority, that he has

ceased competing; he has become one of the baubles with which he surrounds himself. Although the image is ostensibly focused on Peter, more dynamic and aggressive characters attract the viewer's attention, with the opportunistic Clodagh (who is responsible for Peter's overdose) grieving theatrically in the background while a calculating man in the foreground observes.

[Figure 2 inserted here]

[Fig. 2] "Wilson took up the deposited medicine-glass, elevated it, looked at it, smelled into it"

The image is deliberately confusing: based on this edition's other illustrations (see Figures 1, 3, 4, and 5), the bearded man in the foreground appears to be Jeffson. However, the caption reveals it is Wilson, the electrician on the Arctic expedition and Jeffson's main antagonist. Wilson presumably visits the ailing Peter to discuss the expedition and grows suspicious of the scene before him: "At the moment, Clodagh was about to administer a dose to Peters; but … Wilson took up the deposited medicine-glass, elevated it, looked at it, smelled into it" (Shiel 20). Jeffson, to this point, has failed to do anything to prevent Clodagh from poisoning Peter, but it is unclear whether his inefficiency is due to ignorance of the situation, his fear of defying Clodagh, or his own hope for ascendency to role of ship's doctor in Peter's stead and to become his fiancée's social equal if he wins the prize money. Shiel is particularly vague about how much Jeffson is aware of, suspects, ignores, and aids Clodagh. And, while the deliberate poisoning of Peter may seem to work against Shiel's stance about random Darwinian luck in a neutral universe, he ultimately reinforces Peter's status as an addict as an unlucky circumstance that provided Clodagh with the perfect cover for murder and the potential social ascendancy of her fiancé. Jeffson is therefore portrayed in the

illustration with equivalent social and Darwinian ambiguity: he's physically situated between two different senses of the elite or, depending on how the ambiguous Shiel meant it, between two different types of degenerative bodies—Wilson's base masculinity and Peter's effete nobility.

The first of these is the more animalistic model: the dynamic, middle-class, heavily-bearded Wilson, who not only has the intelligence to understand immediately what has happened to Peter, but whose capability and vigor are apparent in the illustration. Wilson is hairier and more muscular than the other two men and exhibits a level of overt calculation that the other figures do not, appearing coiled and ready to spring into action. His alpha-male dominance is heightened by the expedition; a "big man, with a massively-built, long face, made longer by a beard," Wilson is positioned as the savviest predator in the exploration group ("by far our best shot"), who spends his time killing large animals for the group's initial survival (Shiel 29). The trip becomes more fraught and competitive as they near the finish line, prompting Jeffson to realize that Wilson "was in deadly earnest to kill me" (34). Indeed, Wilson's beard and Jeffson's later adoption of one are significant on two fronts: facial hair not only enables men to align themselves more closely with the animal world, but it also represents a more socially-constructed form of survival and authority: from the 1850s onward, facial hair—once forbidden for British soldiers—became compulsory well into the twentieth century as a way of intimidating and asserting authority over imperial subjects.[11] Wilson is therefore depicted as Jeffson's superior in terms of raw masculinity, adaptive power, animalistic shrewdness, savviness around drug usage, and outright attempts to murder his colleagues once they near their goal. Wilson is renowned for his "physical fitness combined with special knowledge"; but Jeffson, described as "too lucky a dog to get left out," finds his enemy's usually excellent gunshots "passed harmlessly by me" (26, 35). He

[11] See Bradley Deane, *Masculinity and the New Imperialism: Rewriting Manhood in British Popular Literature, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: CUP, 2014: 56).

reaches the North Pole and survives the ensuing apocalypse, through no greater trait than luck.

The second of these men between whom Jeffson is positioned—Peter Peters—is of a more fey, aristocratic mode of masculinity Darwinian mode of safety and survival predicated on resources and the protection of social groups. Cameron emphasizes the slightness of Peter's shape, his gleaming blonde hair, the profile of a handsome, young, beardless face, but his form is prostrate and hidden. Both image and text minimize his physicality, with the exception of his violent poisoning symptoms; when his body fails because of substance abuse, Clodagh exploits the situation for her own ends. This represents a prominent narrative of "radical self-subtraction that drunkards were thought to undergo as they consistently destroyed family, home, livelihoods, minds, and bodies" (Zieger 2). Peter's luck of birth placed him somehow above nature and above embodiment, except when he deliberately reifies his embodiment through drug use. It is through this spectrum—from Wilson (the arch, sober animal) to Peter (the feeble, debauched aristocrat)—that one can understand Jeffson's later recalibrations of aristocratic performance in light of drug use and survival within nature. Jeffson is trapped between these two ideals in Cameron's image—neither disembodied nor overly physical, neither clean-shaven nor bearded, standing actively and yet appearing stagnant and posed, participating in the dynamics of the scene, but passively. Jeffson, in his attempt to ascend the class divide, straddles both worlds only to find that they are equally irrelevant. He carves a third, semi-arbitrary path that borrows from each of these men, and yet neither of their traits ultimately assist him in his survival.

Shiel has a particular double-standard when it comes to drug use: it is acceptable for Jeffson to abuse substances because he is fortunate enough not to be an "addict" (or, at least, fortunate enough to survive his addictions). Wilson, on the other hand, is not seen to injest any substances, using "spirits-of-wine" only to thaw the mercury in the ship's thermometers;

yet, despite his high level of intelligence, virility, and personal care, Wilson is not lucky enough, not cosmically elite enough, to merit survival or any elevation of his social position before his death (Shiel 29). Here Shiel, in grandiose fashion, places himself as the author in the role of a pseudo-deity: his narrative cruelty toward Peter's fate and contradictory attitudes toward substance abuse match the cruelty of a Darwinian universe in which God does not exist, or at least remains aloof from the plight of his creations, allowing them to fight it out among themselves.

Clodagh and Chemistry

In tandem with Peter's addiction, class status, and dubious position within a 'natural' hierarchy, is the ostensible villain of the piece, Countess Clodagh, who serves as an aggregate of several key themes. As the most unambiguously aristocratic character, she deals most overtly with Darwinian sexual selection; as a chemist, she employs her knowledge of pharmacology and drug use to create a more competitive and suitable mate. Jeffson says:

> Our proposed marriage was opposed by both my family and hers: by mine, because her father and grandfather had died in lunatic asylums; and by hers, because, forsooth, I was neither a rich nor a noble match … But Clodagh's extraordinary passion for me was to be stemmed neither by their threats nor prayers. What a flame, after all, was Clodagh! Sometimes she frightened me. (Shiel 16)

Clodagh is a plotting, malevolent aristocrat almost excavated from previous genres, illustrating both her long familial and literary lineages: she could be an aristocratic villain from the annals of Gothic literature, radical fiction, or sensation novels. This heritage, manifesting itself so patently in the present, highlights the *fin de siècle*'s particular preoccupation with time: "despite the many histories that neatly divide time, no period or

epoch is really discrete" (Zimmerman 8). Clodagh therefore is an aggregate of all the fortunes, failures, and foibles of those who came before her, allowing the vagaries of the past to bleed, for Shiel and for Jeffson, uncomfortably into the present.

Significantly, the pathologization of Clodagh and her family renders her potential marriage an issue of class as well as of heredity and breeding beyond classed conceptions of blood. While Jeffson makes much of Clodagh's older age—a factor lessening her maximum reproductive capacity and complicating their unbalanced social statuses—her family's mental health issues make her, to Jeffson's mind, a dubious Darwinian candidate for a bride and future mother. Although Clodagh thrives, she can only do so through the unhinged, drug-based destruction of her family, adding yet more ableist contours to Shiel's already-fraught degenerative landscape. That Jeffson is willing to overlook the strong social and eugenicist oppositions to their marriage—purely for the sake of Clodagh's status and wealth—indicates a continuation of the contradictory ideas surrounding ideas of "noble blood" and "good breeding" that were common to the period. In addition to the various mid-century endogamy-versus-exogamy debates, these ideas were particularly prevalent in the wake of Darwin, who writes that the effects of aristocratic marriage practices were a "direct evil" for Natural Selection (*Descent* 163).[12]

Clodagh's literary lineage is further explored as she discusses her penchant for creating drugs. Shiel compares her to famous aristocratic poisoners of history and legend, including Medea, Helen of Troy, Calypso, and Lucrezia Borgia—popularly characterized by their destructive, obstructive tendencies and contributions to their families' downfalls. While Kent Linthicum argues that "Shiel's novel … suggests that it is ecological pressures, rather than social ones, which cause humanity to evolve" (149), those two realms are not, and cannot be, separated in this text. In addition to the harm of her own line through her

[12] See "The Right of Primogeniture – Mr. Ewart's motion" (*Tait's Edinburgh Magazine,* 8:4 [March 1837]: 159-62); also Talia Schaffer, *Romances Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: OUP, 2016: 125-58).

knowledge of drugs, Clodagh is obliquely credited as the catalyst for the apocalypse, based on her family's degenerating bodies and the discrepancies in wealth and lineage between her and her potential mate. The mass extinction is foreshadowed in her physical form, her "reddish hair float[ing] loose in a large flimsy cloud about her," with her presence producing fear and nausea in Jeffson (Shiel 20, 129). Those same feelings are repeated over the course of his travels, when he encounters the other brightly-colored cloud with poisonous tendencies.

The most damning discourse is Clodagh's proximity to the medical and scientific community. She is heavily connected to, and yet continually at variance with, a doctor—her fiancé. A chemist in her own right, she only appears to have the capacity for, or willingness to, make poisons: "I find a sensuous pleasure, almost a sensual, in dabbling in delicate drugs" (Shiel 20). Clodagh forwards the progression of scientific discovery, but her corrupt motives and interference lead to the destruction of thousands of years of human advancement and nearly all human life. Jeffson discovers her body on his return to England, her corpse reifying her connection to the long-distant past. Presumably the last of her family line, Clodagh is depicted as a decaying mummy, posed in frozen terror clinging to a pillar like a victim of Mount Vesuvius; and, just as Pompeii in 1901 had further excavations yet to be undertaken, so does Jeffson realize the extent he has left to uncover, in terms of the destruction and suffering Clodagh wrought. Clodagh and—through Jeffson's survival and self-elevation—the aristocratic institution endure, but they are atrophied, increasingly perverted, and cannot escape being shaped by the effects of nature.

[Figure 3 inserted here]

[Fig. 3] "She lay in a very crooked pose… in her left hand a roll of bank-notes, and in her lap three watches"

Cameron's illustration of Jeffson finding Clodagh's corpse is notable for its departure from the text—perhaps for reasons of modesty, but also to foreground alcohol as the most notable feature. Instead of a gruesomely decomposing, kneeling skeleton affixed to a balcony pillar, Cameron depicts Clodagh resting gently, as though merely asleep, in a throne-like armchair. Although no alcohol appears in the written scene, the illustration features an opulent decanter and half-full glass, which are the only objects in the room and which reside on a table between the characters and the viewer. The decanter and glass are placed on a precariously fragile-looking table, recalling Clodagh's "delicate drugs." Although dishevelled (her clothes are rumpled, her posture slumped, and her cloud of hair loosened from the elaborate Gibson Girl bouffant in Figure 2), Clodagh's high-backed armchair and stillness connote a certain declining grandeur compared to the animated-but-bedraggled Jeffson who stands inconsequentially behind her.

Jeffson's tepid feelings about his fiancée during their courtship and after her death solidify his own ambiguous class position and Darwinian suitability. Although a cold and perhaps misguided form of sexual selection, Darwin comments on the implicit connections between wealth, breeding, and evolution:

> In all civilized countries man accumulates property and bequeaths it to his children. So that the children in the same country do not by any means start fair in the race for success. But this is far from an unmixed evil; for without the accumulation of capital the arts could not progress … Nor does the moderate accumulation of wealth interfere with the process of selection. When a poor man becomes rich, his children enter trades or professions in which there is struggle enough, so that the able body and mind succeed best … No doubt wealth when very great tends

> to convert men into useless drones, but their number is never large; and some degree of elimination here occurs. (*Descent* 169-70)

What Darwin speaks of, however, is the benefit of *moderate* financial accumulation, which leads to the physical security of one's offspring—Darwin is careful to signify that anything more than a moderate accumulation of capital will ultimately serve as a detriment to Natural Selection, when the calculation of capital takes the place of an assessment of physical traits. With Jeffson and Clodagh, wealth and its correlating social status have mutated over the course of human civilization from being just one consideration inside the practice of sexual selection to becoming the chief consideration of a smaller and smaller elite pool, leading to hereditary collapse resulting from, as Darwin writes in *Origin*, the diminished vigor and fertility that comes from interbreeding.[13] This contemporary aristocracy becomes, as Jeffson later calls his own ultra-elite solitary pool, "a true nobility … the nobility of self-extinction" (Shiel 207).

Jeffson and Opium, Alcohol, and Marijuana

That Jeffson survives the journey to the Pole, the subsequent poisonous cloud, and his numerous drug binges while setting off dangerous explosives, and also manages to find a suitable sexual partner in an otherwise extinct world, speaks to the role that chance places in the development and survival of a species, as well as to the vagaries of class. Shiel's text provides no clear-cut moral or warning, and the protagonist has few redeeming features; he seems almost randomly selected as a protagonist, highlighting on the novel's structural level that Jeffries is not necessarily the fittest for survival, but he is the luckiest. Direct parallels are made between Jeffson and Peter, not only in terms of their high status resulting from luck—Peter being born into the upper classes and Jeffson naming himself emperor of the world with

[13] See Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* ([1859]. Ed. Jim Endersby. Cambridge UP, 2009: 82).

no one to contradict him—but also to the luck of their survival when it comes to drug use. Both men are of relatively similar physical fortitude, with Peter being young and healthy except for his substance use; both men are doctors, and both have close personal relationships with Countess Clodgah. Peter, however, is well practiced in consuming his one narcotic of choice and has access to the highest comforts and medical help that society can provide. And yet Peter is the one who dies—admittedly with Clodagh's assistance.

Jeffson, on the other hand, is seemingly new to substance use only after the apocalypse; he abuses multiple substances amidst fire and explosions and without the safety net of medical care, modern amenities, and a concerned community. Further, Jeffson actively attempts to end his bloodline during his intoxicated rampages, hoping to erase all of humanity with his death; he continues in this vein for at least two decades, in constant risk of overdose or immolation. And yet he survives. Provocatively, Jeffson's compulsive traveling, self-worship, and destruction of cityscapes anticipates what Adam Colman defines as the "addiction aesthetic," whose "similarly repetitive nature … combines the propulsion of desire with a widened range of exploration" (2). And yet, the fact of his survival mitigates these compulsions, taking them away from discussions of addiction and into the realm of class and evolutionary fitness.

[Figure 4 inserted here]

[Fig. 4] "Soon after midnight there was a sudden and very visible increase in the conflagration"

In Cameron's illustration of one of Jeffson's many episodes of arson, substances again take pride of place, surrounding him on all sides: a hookah pipe rests at his feet, again asserting its dominance by standing between the viewer and the rest of the scene. To his left,

Jeffson is cut off by a decanter similar to Clodagh's, but on a sturdier table—lower, solidly built, and with four legs instead of three. But the table legs become perilously thin the closer they get to the ground, illustrating the precarious foundation on which Jeffson's substance abuse and his survival reside. A wisp of cloud in the background (whether a cloud of arson smoke or the titular purple cloud), boxes in Jeffson overhead and hangs over the decanter, as though it sprang from the open bottle itself; in a way, it has.

The majesty conveyed in the illustration casts Jeffson as a worthy match for Clodagh, with his own cloud of hair appearing in the form of a long beard, blowing in the wind and mirroring the shape of the smoke or cloud over his balcony. Although the novel is told through Jeffson's eyes, Shiel's narrative voice regarding drug use is wildly hypocritical when compared to his lack of sympathy for Peter. The rather problematic reason Jeffson is allowed to delve into dissolution without fully losing the audience's sympathy (nor with Jeffson himself gaining any sympathy for Peter) is twofold. First, and most sanctimoniously of Shiel, Jeffson is able to recover because he is, according to Shiel, a true aristocrat within nature: he survives and thrives due to blind luck as much as skill, adaptability, and knowledge of advanced civilization; and second, because substance use is the evolutionary test which gains a moral component only if the individual fails.

Leda and Abstinence

The text's stance on substance abuse, class, and Darwinian luck grows vaguer when Jeffson meets Leda, his pet-turned-wife. Her presence forces him to re-interrogate social rank, helps to reduce (if not fully eradicate) his substance use, and provides humanity with the potential of salvation. However, far from bringing clarity and consistency, Leda exists ambiguously in several realms that are central to Shiel's novel. The youngest person in the world but with the longest aristocratic lineage—which Jeffson pieces together when he

discovers the ornamented skeletons of what he presumes to be her royal parents—she outranks and yet defers to Jeffson, making it unclear if the pre-apocalyptic class structures he repeats but does not respect even matter in the post-apocalyptic world. Jeffson comments on her evolutionary status and feral nature frequently: positively, without the taint of human culture, and negatively, as stupid and unevolved—an inversion of Clodagh's overly-cultured savagery. Jeffson regards Leda warily, like an unknown species, saying, "how much she divines, knows, or intends, I have no idea, continually questioning myself as to whether she is all simplicity, or all cunning" (Shiel 213). Leda is Clodagh's "light" double, but her lightness stems from her luck: unlike Clodagh, who was bogged in her own class history, Leda starts with a relatively fresh slate and has next to no cultural markers except those that Jeffson teaches her. She's lucky enough to be younger than Clodagh, higher ranking, in better mental health, free from addiction despite drinking wine from the cradle. In short, she is the perfect mate for Jeffson, not only in Shiel's ableist, sexist, and racist discourse, but also in terms of the role luck plays in survival. Leda is perhaps even luckier than Jeffson, having survived the apocalypse from a more vulnerable age and yet protected from its hardships. But the inheritability of luck, as is part of Shiel's point, is impossible to measure. Leda's relative status to Jeffson, and the future of their children and the human race, remain unknown.

Cameron provides an image free from substances and their paraphernalia—the only illustration set entirely in nature (despite far more visually dynamic scenes in the novel set at sea, in the tundra, and English countryside):

[Figure 5 inserted here]

[Fig. 5] "I came upon her sleeping on her arm between overgrown trellises, where the vine buried her in shade"

The figure of Leda replaces the hookahs and decanters of previous images, the "cloud" of foliage stretching from her vulnerable figure to surround Jeffson. Toxic substances have been replaced by more wholesome ones, which ultimately returns Jeffson to a position of power; without the terrifying effects of the cloud and mind-altering substances weighing down on Jeffson, his actions are no longer framed as those of a victim of an apocalypse. Having spent twenty years processing his (un)lucky survival and trauma through a combination of substance abuse and delusions of grandeur, Jeffson is initially unable to handle this sudden shift in power and the realization that he is not the last human on earth. Following his recent observation—"I wonder what … some Shah, or Tsar, of the far-off past, would say now of me, if eye could rest upon me! With what awe would he certainly shrink," it is not surprising that Leda's appearance overturns his worldview (Shiel 170). So shaken is Jeffson's security in his own solitude and class rank that he briefly contemplates cannibalism as a disproportionate expression of dominance over the vulnerable Leda:

> The earth was mine by old right: I felt that: and this creature a mere slave upon whom, without heat or haste, I might perform my will … the blackest and the basest of all the devils of the Pit was whispering in my breast with calm persistence: "Kill, kill—and eat." *Why* I should have killed her I do not know … But I know that after twenty years of solitude on a planet the human soul is more enamoured of solitude than of life … after twenty years of solitary selfishness, a man becomes, without suspecting it … a real and true beast. (187-88)

A sense of balance soon asserts itself: Jeffson regains his faculties and begins to re-socialize himself in his attempt to educate Leda, salvaging a microcosm of human civilization in their relationship. In spite of Jeffson's initial romantic rejections of Leda and his commitment to end the human race by not procreating with her, his resolve eventually wears down as they

fall in love, despite the threat of the peripatetic cloud's return. The novel ends without resolving whether Jeffson and Leda survive and procreate in their problematic Garden of Eden, cryptically alluding to John Ball's 1381 Peasants' Revolt sermon, "When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?" ("When" 9). Beyond concepts of class, what does this mean for the state of human progress? Will humanity rebuild itself through the endurance of the luckiest, or will the human race devolve and flounder due to the narrow genetic pool? Jeffson observes,

> A nice race it would be … half-criminal like the father, half-idiot like the mother: just like the last, in short. They used to say, in fact, the offspring of a brother and sister was always weak-headed: and from such a wedlock certainly came human race, so no wonder it was what it was: and so it would have to be again now. (Shiel 206)

Although Jeffson's judgment is remains questionable, his concerns about breeding are not necessarily arbitrary or ill-founded. It is unclear by the end of the novel if humanity will progress or regress through their children—whether they are going to facilitate a more positive version of the human race or merely relive mistakes already made.

While substance abuse is largely absent from the latter part of the novel, in the last paragraphs it reappears, tangled once more with issues of potential degeneration and class ambiguity. Jeffson ends the novel taking a hierarchical step back in favor of Leda's dominance, proposes that they lock themselves away with provisions, and await their potential deaths should the cloud return—which serves as a metaphor for his own mental health and addiction. Jeffson's vague threat of relapse is as constant as his worry about the cloud, about the degeneration of humanity, and about his own uncertain class status. Such

concerns are gently rebuffed by Leda's sober, aristocratic presence, who decides instead to test their luck in the natural world.[14]

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___. Figure 1. "The Purple Cloud Title Page."

___. Figure 2. "Wilson took up the deposited medicine-glass, elevated it, looked at it, smelled into it."

___. Figure 3. "She lay in a very crooked pose … in her left hand a roll of bank-notes, and in her lap three watches."

___. Figure 4. "Soon after midnight there was a sudden and very visible increase in the conflagration."

___. Figure 5. "I came upon her sleeping on her arm between overgrown trellises, where the vine buried her in shade."

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