

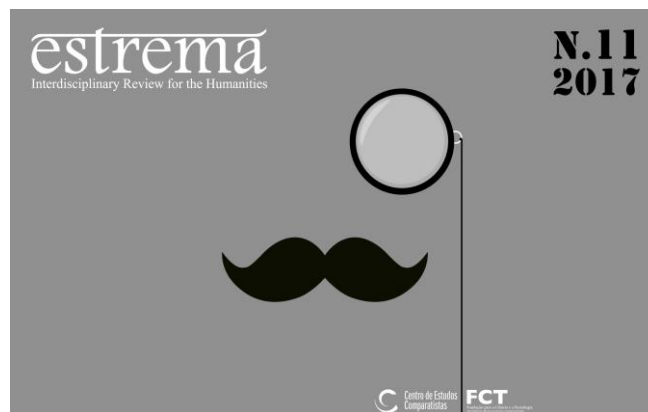
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**Maps, Razors, Monocles, Diamonds: Reading H. R. Haggard's
King Solomon's Mines through the lenses of Victorian Material
Culture**

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Abstract: This article proposes a cultural analysis of Henry Rider Haggard's nineteenth-century classic *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) through an interdisciplinary perspective that draws from Victorian material culture, Thing theory and postcolonial studies. The ways in which objects contribute to the characters' delineation will be taken into consideration in order to analyse the function they perform in relation to the mythopoeia of the British Empire and to the novel's blatant racism and implicit colonial politics. In terms of methodology, a close reading of the text will be carried out in an attempt to investigate the boundaries between fiction and reality and the extent to which objects become symbols of an epoch and emblems of the Empire.

Keywords: King Solomon's Mines; Henry Rider Haggard; British Empire; Postcolonial Studies; Thing Theory; Victorian Material Culture.

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to examine the cultural significance of the objects represented in Henry Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885). The ways in which objects contribute to the characters' delineation will be taken into consideration in order to analyse the function they perform in relation to the mythopoeia of the Empire and to the novel's implicit colonial discourse. Through a close reading of the text, the boundaries between fiction and reality will be explored along with the function objects perform as symbols of an epoch and emblems of the Empire.

It will be argued that the self-evident 'civilised *versus* barbarians' dichotomy that permeates *King Solomon's Mines* from beginning to end, is, in fact, skilfully conveyed also by the implicit meaning which certain objects are charged with. As such, the following analysis starts from a reflection on the centrality of objects in our everyday lives and in our imagination. In the first part of this paper, I will set the bases for an object-focused approach to this nineteenth-century classic. Haggard's narrative strategies will consequently be explored by focusing on a series of objects that play a crucial role in the novel so as to demonstrate the intrinsic connection between the characters' development and the 'things' that surround them. Finally, in the last section, the role of the diamonds as alluring objects and as a plot driver will be further examined and interpreted in relation to the novel's capitalist sub-text. As shining portable objects, the

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diamonds stand out in the narrative unfolding when compared to gold and ivory and assume a revealing connotation if connected to the novel's colonial politics. It will be ultimately argued that they stand for a capitalist accumulation to be achieved through the colonial enterprise.

Setting the bases for an object-focused reading of *King Solomon's Mines*

In the dialogical relationship between different cultures, artefacts have inevitably played an important role as conveyors of cultural memory and have always represented a source of inspiration for historians, writers and artists alike. As Chris Tilley insightfully observes, “material forms are essential vehicles for the (conscious or unconscious) self-realization of the identities of the individuals and groups” (Tilley et al. 2011, 7). Contemporary researchers in the field of cultural memory studies emphasise that “individuals are able to frame their personal identity through the orientating symbols of identity of their social world, symbols which are embodied in the objectified forms of a commonly shared cultural tradition” (Dietrich Harth 2008, 86). These “objectified forms” can assume a material dimension in the literary narrativization of objects and can summon up memory, identity and cultural issues even in their fictional dimension.

On the subject of the interrelation between the world of objects and that of subjects, several representatives of the cultural Marxist tradition have produced a conspicuous critical apparatus, from Walter Benjamin to Bruno

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Latour. The critical approach of the so-called Thing theory (Brown 2001), which places itself within critical theory and the field of material culture studies, has been flourishing in the last few decades due to an increasing interest towards “the social life of things” (Appadurai 1986), whose sense and meaning has been investigated in various disciplines, including literary studies and visual culture studies. Yet when objects are represented in literature, they necessarily transcend their physicality and take shape by means of their performance within the novel: mimicking their real function, their meaning is not intrinsic, but rather depends on the perception and fruition of the object itself by the different characters. In Elaine Freedgood's words, “[w]hen pressed into the increasingly rigorous metaphorical service required by the symbolic organization of the literary novel, the fictional object enters an alienating system of figural exchange” (Freedgood 2006, 139).

According to Freedgood, when it comes to the interpretation of realism in literature, the objects' trajectory within the novels has to be followed by readers and critics in order to dig into the “fugitive meaning of apparently nonsymbolic objects” (4) and consequently disclose their secret (hi)story. In other words, the act of interpreting realist novels requires reading such texts through the function and value of the objects encountered therein. In her reading of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) and Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1861), Freedgood focuses on three items which expose the colonial discourse embedded in these novels: the conspicuous amount of details on the mahogany furniture in *Jane Eyre* implicitly inform the readers of the

British deforestation carried out in the West Indies; similarly, the calico curtains in *Mary Barton* hark back to the exploitation of India and the “Negro-head” tobacco mentioned in *Great Expectations* (Dickens 327) hints at the massacre of the Aborigines perpetrated by the colonialists on behalf of the British Empire. Such an approach to literary texts gives voice to the novels’ more obscure subtexts and not always explicit allusions, ultimately encouraging a deeper understanding of these nineteenth-century masterpieces.

Drawing on Freedgood’s reading of these Victorian narratives, in an attempt to undertake a similar task, this paper seeks to interpret the significance of objects in Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* by examining their layered meanings and the extent to which they reveal traits and features of Victorian society and British colonial discourse. Yet if one decides to analyse this novel from such a perspective, a first, important *generic* contradiction immediately emerges: far from being a work of realist fiction, Haggard’s work has been classified as an adventure fiction novel, with a clear target-market at the time of publication, “all the big and little boys who read it” (Haggard 1885). Nonetheless, as Heidi Kaufman puts it, it cannot be denied that “there is much more at work in this tale than just a fantastic imagination” (Kaufman 2005, 520).

Psychoanalytical and gender readings of Haggard’s imperial romance have prevailed in the last few decades: *King Solomon’s Mines* has been extensively read as “an adventure across psychological terrain into unknown and tabooed frontiers of the unconscious or as a journey of exploration” (Monsman 2000, 282), with each exciting twist and turn of the

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plot towards the descent into Sheba's body representing the British colonial conquest of African sexualised landscape (see Stott 1989 and McClintock 1995).

While acknowledging the value of such readings, I intend to carry out a different investigation of *King Solomon's Mines* by resorting to an interdisciplinary approach that draws from Victorian material culture, Thing theory and postcolonial studies, in the hope that such a reading may provide an alternative perspective on this nineteenth-century novel. Nevertheless, the limitations of a critical approach that focuses on the representation of 'things' in a literary text need to be acknowledged. Indeed, as Steven Connor (2009) observes,

as with any other announcement of a new direction in literary and cultural theory, the thingly turn has taken forms that, proclaiming themselves as new, in fact serve very nicely to ginger up well-established and therefore somewhat fatigued lines or idioms of enquiry.

If on the one hand it cannot be denied that investigating the underlining meaning and cultural value of objects in literary works is hardly groundbreaking, on the other hand it is also true that such a perspective provides a different standpoint to observe the interrelation between characters and objects, through a literary analysis that unconventionally focuses on the latter rather than the former. Furthermore, such an analysis enables a wider reflection on the role of commodities in the Victorian era and on the ways in which and the reasons why such commodities are represented and repurposed in fiction.

Having set the bases for and considered the limitations of an object-focused study of *King Solomon's Mines*, the following analysis will explore

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how Haggard aligns specific objects to characters in order to establish and reiterate clear symbolic boundaries in opposition with one another. Although an array of 'things' displayed in the novel has been taken into consideration, the ensuing reading will primarily, but not exclusively, focus on objects that either perform a defined function within the novel's narrative economy or that can be considered as emblematic of specific traits of the Victorian fin-de-siècle society, namely the map to King Solomon's Mines, the Victorian commodities showcased by Captain Good, and the diamonds.

As repeatedly observed by Haggard's criticism, *King Solomon's Mines* is constructed on and imbued with binary oppositions: civilized *versus* barbarian, black *versus* white, master *versus* servant, man *versus* woman, human *versus* supernatural. As pointed out by Kaufman (519),

Haggard is not merely writing a fantasy novel, easily dismissible as boys' adventure fiction, but participating in a system of signs, values, and hierarchies that enables him, and others like him, to write white, Christian, English, heterosexual identity into perpetual supremacy.

Yet, as Brantlinger (2012, 138) observes, one should avoid the temptation of abruptly labelling Haggard's work as "inherently racist", and rather acknowledge a clever employment of the classical oppositional narrative features of the quest romance. If it is undeniable that these oppositions do exist and do create clear dichotomies within the novel, how do objects contribute to the creation of this "system of signs, values, and hierarchies" (Kaufman 2005, 519)?

The map to King Solomon's mines

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For a while we tramped on in silence, till Umbopa, who was marching in front, broke into a Zulu chant about how some brave men, tired of life and the tameness of things, started off into a great wilderness to find new things or die... (Haggard 1885, 36)

Although *King Solomon's Mines* has been categorised as an adventure tale for boys, therefore relegated to the realm of fantasy, Haggard permeated his story with hints of realism drawn from his personal experience in South Africa. Allan Quatermain, protagonist and story-teller, is immediately presented in the act of "taking up a pen to try and write a history", stressing his own inadequacy as a writer. In order to assert the authority of its first-person narrator and to give a deeper sense of veracity to the story, Haggard employs the stratagem of subtly making reference to myths and stories passed on from a blurred, narrativized past, convincingly creating an aura of mystery and enchantment around these fabled mines.

The object that confers reliability to the legend of King Solomon's mines and that renders possible the impossible endeavour of venturing in such a difficult task is the map tragically drawn by the Portuguese trader José da Silvestra on the verge of his death, "with his blood for ink" (Haggard 1885, 22). The map contributes to achieve what Barthes (1989, 141-148) defined as "the reality effect" in the Victorian novel. This reality effect, in Freedgood's words (2006, 9), "ensur[es] that we can interpret realism adequately *and* protect it and ourselves from being overwhelmed by allegorical surfeit". Throughout this journey, amid the subterranean paths and hidden dangers of the African territory, the map becomes the only object which the British explorers can grab on to, providing constant guidance despite its palpable flaws:

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We had nothing to guide ourselves by except the distant mountains and old José da Silvestra's chart, which, considering that it was drawn by a dying and half distraught man on a fragment of linen three centuries ago, was not a very satisfactory sort of thing to work on. Still, such as it was, our little hope of success depended on it. (Haggard 1885, 50)

Admittedly, the device of employing a map as a tangible support for the heroes' journey, an object on which they can rely upon as it seems to be the only 'thing' able to facilitate their arduous expedition to reach hidden treasures, was certainly not original and inserts itself in the literary tradition of adventure novels, such as Haggard's acknowledged literary antecedent, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883).

If one tries to read further into the broader significance of the map in relation to the British imperialistic agenda, therefore bringing its "allegorical surfeit" (Freedgood 2006, 9) to the ground, the map drawn by "the first Portuguese who landed on these shores" (Haggard 1885, 20) helps establish a white hierarchy within the novel, implicitly underlining that British explorers can succeed, and indeed *will* succeed, where Portuguese explorers miserably failed. This is a widespread tendency within the nineteenth-century novel, which, as pointed out by Elleke Boehmer (2005, 133), more or less explicitly "had mapped a world-picture in which Britain stood at the centre of things".

Performing a similar function to that of magical objects in fairy tales, the map simultaneously acts as a concrete object that attempts to reify the myth and as a fictional device that allows the British to penetrate into a blurred "imaginative geography" (Said 1979, 49). While it is acknowledged that the map "underscores the sexual nature of the quest" (Stott 1989, 77), it

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ultimately represents a “socially constructed form of knowledge” (Harley 1988, 277-312) and power, thus falling into the symbolic system of British imperialist discourse.

Razors and dentures: Victorian power, Victorian cleanliness

The depiction of the indigenous population in *King Solomon's Mines* is certainly far from being original and is rather shaped according to the clichés of the fin-de-siècle imperialist mentality. The natives are obtuse, primitive, and easily impressionable by rifles, monocles, dentures and beads. They are compared to statues whose “waving plumes, glancing spears and iron-backed ox-hide shields” create a “grandeur of spectacle” (Haggard 1885, 89) before the eyes of the British adventurers. Once again, Haggard reinforces the opposition between civilisation *versus* barbarity by projecting an image of the natives which simultaneously objectifies and alienates them from the manners and appearance of the explorers. As Boehmer (2005, 48) observes,

Colonialist discourse can be taken to refer to that collection of symbolic practices, including textual codes and conventions and implied meanings, which Europe deployed in the process of its colonial expansion and, in particular, in understanding the bizarre and apparently untranslatable strangeness with which it came into contact.

This “untranslatable strangeness” is rendered in the vivid descriptions of the Zulus, of which the above-mentioned excerpt is but an example. In his reflection on Freud's reading of *King Solomon's Mines* and the layered

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personalities of its male protagonists, Etherington (1978, 71-87) argues that the more the three British men infiltrate Kukuanaaland, the more they become uncivilised, gradually descending into a primitive state. Etherington goes on defining the official civilization "as unserviceable as Captain Good's immaculate clothing in the bushlands of the imagination" (Etherington 83). If on an imaginary level Good's manners and neatness are useless, from an alternative point of view this exaggerated characterisation does indeed succeed in giving voice to a specific trait of Victorian society: the obsession for cleanliness. Such obsession evidently stands for a further symbol of 'white' civilisation within the novel and, as later argued, it is forcefully conveyed by Good's attachment to trivial objects. The monocle renders him particularly interesting to the eyes of the natives: as Allan Quatermain observes, "somehow they all seemed to like Good; I think his eye-glass and solitary whisker gave him a fictitious value" (Haggard 1885, 192).

This is the same monocle that he will offer as a souvenir at the end of their adventure to the Zulu Infadoos, who, as the narrator informs us, foresaw "that the possession of such an article would enormously increase his prestige [...]. Anything more incongruous than the old Warrior looked with an eye-glass I never saw. Eye-glasses don't go well with leopard-skin cloaks and black ostrich plumes" (Haggard 1885, 193). Paradoxically, the monocle and the denture that would have been considered in Darwinian terms as evidence of the British man's physical deficits turn him into an attractive figure and stand for nineteenth-century symbols of technological advancement in opposition with the natives' primitiveness. In other words,

they represent simultaneously markers of weakness and strength, objects of disability but also of power.

Captain Good's meticulous habits and neat appearance often contribute to temper the dramatic effect provoked by the gentlemen's misadventures, adding a marked comic quality to the novel. Indeed, as previously mentioned, Good's characterisation through his always impeccable dresses and almost maniacal habits is symptomatic of the extreme ideal of cleanliness in Victorian Britain. As pointed out by Anne McClintock (1995, 506) in her excursus on soap, civilization and Victorian commodity culture, "Victorian cleaning rituals were peddled globally as the God-given sign of Britain's evolutionary superiority, and soap was invested with magical, fetish powers". In other words, cleanliness is next to godliness: the notion of British hygiene in the nineteenth century implied that even during long journeys, "habits such as manners, recreational pursuits, methods to ensure personal comfort, and rituals of social ranking identified and reinforced people's sense of national identity" (Grigg 2008). The ideal of cleanliness is exemplified by the Victorian commodities that Good keeps carrying around during the journey. Among these commodities, it is worth mentioning the safety razor, a specific kind of razor "with a guard beneath the blade edge to prevent major gashes while shaving" (Waits 2014, vii).

In one of the numerous plot twists of the novel, the narrative voice lingers on the description of Captain Good while bathing and shaving, unaware of being watched from a distance by a group of threatening Zulus:

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Then diving again into the hag, he brought out a little pocket razor with a guard to it, such as are sold to people afraid of cutting themselves, or to those about to undertake a sea voyage. Then he vigorously scrubbed his face and chin with the fat and began. [...] It seemed so very odd that a man should take the trouble to shave himself with a piece of fat in such a place and under such circumstances. (Haggard 1885, 71)

It can be argued that, through the narrator's digression, the razor ceases to be a mere character appendage and comes to stand as a metonymic reference to Victorian cleanliness through which Good inadvertently, and comically, asserts his power over the natives.

The tension that forebodes a tragic conclusion fades away when the Zulus get a glimpse of Sir Good's false teeth. In the representation of two opposite cultural worldviews, objects such as the monocle and the false teeth that are valuable both in terms of aesthetic and practical use in an evolved and civilized society, arouse a reaction of awe mixed with horror in the Zulus: their functional meaning changes, as does their cultural value. These objects confer the British an almost magical, supernatural aura. The teeth that appear and disappear, the monocle described as a round, shiny and transparent eye, the half-shaven face of Captain Good allow the three British gentlemen not only to save their lives but also to acquire agency over the natives and reverse the power dynamics in place. Objects, in this case, have the uncanny ability to turn upside down the authority between the two parties. They attain their own autonomy, their own life; they become catalysts in a critical situation, determining, with their own autonomous existence, an unexpected positive outcome for the British gentlemen.

Good's shaving habit acquires a further connotation if one considers the etymology of the word 'beard' from the latin *barba* and its derivation from the Greek *barbaros*, foreigner, uncivilised. As such, Good's

attachment to this habit, despite it being pointless in the middle of African wildness, represents his successful attempt to cling on to his civilised origins. His grotesque half-shaved face, while provoking great bewilderment, embodies the fear of hybridity and contamination. In another passage of the novel, it is “the passion for civilized dress” (Haggard 1885, 43) that puts Good in mortal danger, and yet it is the servant Khiva that loses his life in the goriest manner, with his body being torn to pieces by the bull's fury. Certainly not a great loss for the British explorers, since the noble sacrifice of the Zulu boy ultimately allows them to obtain a “wonderfully fine lot of ivory” (Haggard 1885, 44), appropriately buried in the desert for being retrieved at a later stage, boosting the British gentlemen's accumulation of riches and wealth, which will reach its peak with the British appropriation of King Solomon's treasure.

Diamonds and artefacts in Solomon's cave

What to make then of the legendary diamonds that triggered the explorers' quest in the first place? Although their expedition was indeed dignified by their will to find out what happened to Sir Henry's brother, the blatant reason behind such an arduous journey was Allan Quatermain's explicit desire to enrich himself. Throughout this sequence of wild adventures, the reader never loses sight of the main objective of the mission: the happy ending for the English gentlemen is around the corner. As Kate Flint (2012, 24) claims,

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Readers are offered thrill predicated simultaneously on dangerous, exotic locations and far less tangible threats of atavistic degeneration, and yet the fin de siècle anxieties exploited by writers such as Rider Haggard [...] are invariably kept in check by their neat plot conclusions.

The fear of contamination and miscegenation is at once exorcized by the novel's closure crowned by the gentlemen's final success and their return to England with plenty of wealth and trophies. Before entering the mines, the gentlemen encounter three ancient sculptures. These three statues evoke a sense of biblical mysticism: they are profane and yet royal, noble and intimidating, worthy of respect because of their ancient Hebrew and Hellenic roots. According to Kaufman, it is through the Hellenic ambiguous hints that Haggard blurs the ethical implications of stealing Solomon's diamonds and ultimately "eradicate[s] imperial guilt", turning the "theft into a reclamation of what belongs to the English men because of their familial connection to the Greeks." (Kaufman 533). In their penetration into Solomon's chamber, they eventually discover "a splendid collection of elephant tusk" and "a score of wooden boxes" (Haggard 171) full of gold pieces. The diamonds were hidden "where it is darkest", inside "three stone chests in the nook" (172). There is an insistence on secrecy and darkness with the treasures visible only through the faint light of a lamp.

The diamonds exerted their magnetic power since the beginning of the novel. As a plot driver, they demanded to become visible, to be exploited as a conquest of the British Empire. As Bill Brown observed in his seminal essay on Thing theory, "We begin to confront the thingness of objects when [...] their flow within the circuits of production and

distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily” (Brown 2001, 4). The ancient artefacts are destined to be brought to the foreground by the British. In order to perform their real function they have “flow within the circuits of consumption and exhibition” (Brown 4). The mines turn into a place of circulation and consumption thanks to the intervention of the British explorers, who seize part of the treasure. The cave with its hidden, non-displayed collection of objects, of which only British gentlemen can use as they see fit, can ultimately be interpreted as the specular opposite of the Great Exhibition in 1851. The intruders in Solomon's mines can be compared to the visitors of the exhibition, who, overwhelmed by its spectacle, “might well have come to see the products of human endeavor, and to imagine [...] in what that endeavor consisted” (Freedgood 147). Indeed, the spectacle of Solomon's labyrinthic mines can be read as a counterpart to the Crystal Palace: “a place where the combined mythologies of consumerism appeared in concentrated form” (Richards 1990, 3).

The fictional act of narrating the vicissitudes that eventually led the three British explorers to have access to the mines and the ensuing detailed description of the subterranean hidden fortune unveiled before their eyes become the exemplification of a subtle form of dominance both as literary “spectacular representation” (Richards 1990, 4) and, within the novel's narrative, as capitalist exchange to the benefit of British individuals. The exhibition of the objects mentioned in Sir Henry's letter at the very end of the novel as trophies of their expedition — the tusks, the buffalo-horns and the axe —, inserts itself in what Freedgood (8) defines as “the

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spectacularization [...] and the alienation of things from their human and geographical origins.” These ‘things’, as “imperial souvenirs”, reiterate the ideological foundations of British imperialism and actively contribute to what Burrow (2013, 74) delineates as “the constitution of the masculinity of the gentleman barbarian.” It can be concluded that the successful accumulation of wealth declares the triumph of British capitalism, in the form of conquest of the objects of desire, the diamonds. As such, these “bright stones” (Haggard 18) become symbols of reinforced economic and imperialist power.

Conclusion

By drawing on Freedgood's reflections on Victorian material culture and Brown's Thing theory, it has been shown how specific objects interact with characters in *King Solomon's Mines* by adding layers of symbolic charge to the novel's colonial discourse, the case of the map and the legendary treasure being two prime examples. The ensuing analysis has demonstrated how seemingly insignificant objects such as the monocle and the razor unveil a distinct nineteenth-century sensibility towards issues such as cleanliness and fear of contamination. Moreover, it has been observed how the delineation of characters through things enacts a series of implicit assumptions in the readers that occur by showing the change in value that the British objects undergo before the eyes of the natives. Finally, the cave as a hidden, subterranean space filled with exotic treasures has been

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interpreted as a specular opposite image of the Great Exhibition, aimed at ultimately reinforcing the assertion of the legitimacy of British power over the diamonds in King Solomon's cave.

It can be concluded that, although *King Solomon's Mines* can be read as a work of escapist fiction, the interplay of objects, characters and imperial discourse renders it a literary classic through which readers can get a glimpse of the fin-de-siècle British anxieties towards race and imperial power, anxieties that are reflected in and enhanced by the inanimate 'things' that populate the novel.

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