King Solomon's Mines Short Guide

King Solomon's Mines by H. Rider Haggard

BOOKRAGS

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Overview

King Solomon's Mines is Allan Quatermain's account of his quest through a dangerous, unknown area of Africa, accompanied by Sir Henry Curtis and Captain John Good. Sir Henry retains Allan Quatermain to guide their expedition to find Sir Henry's lost brother, who had disappeared into the jungle to discover the legendary diamond mines of King Solomon. Following an ancient map, the adventurers set out from Durban, South Africa, and travel into the previously unexplored wilderness. For months they travel through the African bush, cross a great desert, where they almost die of thirst, and climb the snowy mountains known as "Sheba's Breasts," where they barely escape freezing to death. Eventually, they arrive in fertile Kukuanaland, where they help restore a native king to his rightful throne and discover both the legendary diamond mines and Sir Henry's lost brother.

From the moment Quatermain meets his fellow adventurers, the action becomes increasingly fast-paced. The farther they venture from the white man's civilization, the more fantastic their adventures become. By the time Quatermain tells of his return to England at the end of the story, the reader has encountered some of the most compelling characters and fantastic adventures to be found in young adult fiction. King Solomon's Mines is indeed the nineteenth century equivalent of Raiders of the Lost Ark. These works have much in common: interesting heroes, fast-paced action, realistic—sometimes grisly— scenes and fascinating, if repulsive, villains.

The novel can also be seen as an interesting account of a late nineteenthcentury European's view of black Africa.

Though many of the story's events are fantastic and imaginary, Haggard's experiences in Africa enabled him to create a setting which provides interesting detail about the animal life, climate, and topography of Africa and about the customs of its peoples. There are vivid descriptions of elephant hunts, native ceremonies, and tribal warfare and weaponry.

About the Author

Henry Rider Haggard, the sixth son of William and Ella Haggard, was born at Bradenham Hall, Norfolk, England on June 20, 1856. His father was a flamboyant lawyer and country squire who ruled his household strictly.

His eccentricity as a lawyer earned him considerable local notoriety, and his abusive treatment of his tenants and servants made him infamous throughout the county.

Though his father's short temper often made home life difficult, Haggard's gentle mother compensated somewhat for her husband's volatile behavior. Ella Haggard was a published poet, and she encouraged her son's interest in reading. Haggard read with relish such works as the Arabian Nights' Entertainments, Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, and Alexandre Dumas's The Three Musketeers. Haggard loved adventure tales of all types, and his childhood reading anticipated the exciting fiction which he himself would write years later.

Young Haggard was not considered a promising student, and after attending a small country school he went to grammar school in Ipswich for three years, where his academic performance was relatively undistinguished.

Squire Haggard secured his son an appointment to the staff of a friend, Sir Henry Bulwer, who had been appointed lieutenant-governor of Natal in South Africa. Thus, in 1875, at nineteen, Haggard made his first trip to Africa, the continent that would be the setting of many of his most famous stories. While in South Africa Haggard kept detailed notebooks describing both the native Zulus and his own travels throughout the country.

He intended to settle permanently in South Africa, and after leaving the service, he bought a farm in Natal province.

During a brief return to England in 1880, he fell in love with and married Marianna Louisa Margitson, a friend of his sister, and returned with her to South Africa. But the warfare between the British and the Boers—emigrant Dutch farmers who had settled in South Africa in the mid-seventeenth century— had worsened and he feared for the safety of his wife and infant son. The family sold their belongings, and on August 31, 1880, returned to England.

In 1882 Haggard published (at his own expense) a book on the situation in South Africa and began writing fiction.

His first two novels, Dawn (1884) and The Witch's Head (1884) were critical successes but financial failures. Though his desire for a literary career was growing, he could not support his family as a writer. He finished his law studies and decided to give up writing fiction to devote himself entirely to law.

But Haggard's resolution was shortlived. Having bet his brother that he could write a better novel than Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island, he took six weeks to complete the manuscript of an adventure story set in Africa.

He entitled it King Solomon's Mines.

When King Solomon's Mines appeared on September 30, 1885, it was an immediate success. Haggard quickly wrote a sequel entitled Allan Quatermain and, in 1886, published his most famous novel, She. By the end of that year, Haggard had decided to abandon law and devote himself completely to a career as a writer.

Though Haggard subsequently wrote many more works of fiction, his literary reputation now rests almost completely on King Soiomon's Mines and She.

Though extremely popular among his contemporaries, Haggard's later works generally have not found favor with modern audiences.

In 1905 Haggard was at the peak of his career. In the fall of that year, the sequel to She—entitled Ayesha, The Return of She—was published. It sold an amazing 25,000 copies in the first edition, and many of his previous works were being reprinted, sometimes in expensive, illustrated editions.

Haggard's last years were spent writing, speaking, and traveling. The outbreak of World War I dampened sales of his books, and he was forced to sell his farming interests. However, some of his later novels, like Moon of Israel (1919), still sold respectably well. Nevertheless, until his death on May 14, 1925, he remained discouraged by the declining sales of his works. The readership of England had changed. The horrible realities of World War I and the deterioration of the British Empire had left English and American readers little affinity for the adventurous fantasy of Haggard's work. Although most of his once-popular stories are seldom read today, his two classics, King Solomon's Mines and She, remain landmarks of young adult literature.

Setting

The story of King Solomon's Mines takes place in the mid-nineteenth century, a period roughly contemporary with Haggard's own lifetime. The cities, rivers, landmarks, and tribes mentioned in the story are all real, though at the time, little was known about this part of southern Africa. The fact that Africa was relatively unexplored increased readers' interest in the story. Many readers in fact took the book as an actual account of the author's adventures, a view which was encouraged by Haggard's direct and realistic prose.

Haggard's narrative is filled with interesting details about the African environment. To evoke the difficulty of the adventurers' journey across the wilderness, he tells us of the "dreadful tsetse fly, whose bite is fatal to all animals except donkeys and men." Of the twenty oxen with which they had begun their expedition, only twelve remained: "One we had lost from the bite of a cobra, three had perished from the want of water, one had been lost, and the other three had died from eating the poisonous herb called tulip."

Social Sensitivity

King Solomon's Mines clearly expresses certain racial prejudices that were dominant attitudes in Haggard's own time. The fact that, like his creator, Quatermain admires and respects black Africans does not obscure his belief that blacks and whites must remain separate. Indeed, these very sentiments are spoken more often by the blacks in the story than by the whites. However, though the novel does not envision true equality or unity among blacks and whites, it is important to note that Haggard's work does affirm—very strongly, in fact—a sense of noble values inherent in both races. Though culturally different, both races possess people of honor and goodness just as both possess people of treachery and evil.

Haggard's view that blacks and whites could inhabit the same moral world was more progressive than the views of many of his contemporaries, who believed that all native Africans were simply savages.

An interesting passage in this regard occurs in the first chapter of King Solomon's Mines, when Allan decides to substitute the word "natives" for the more commonly used "niggers." It is worth noting that, offensive as the word "niggers" may be to contemporary ears, Quatermain also sees it as a demeaning and reprehensible term. He objects specifically to its connotation of inferior moral character, and suggests that a black "native" can be just as much a "gentleman" as a white man.

With regard to its treatment of women, however, Haggard's book may seem less progressive. This is clearly a "boy's book" about a "man's world," in which women have only a peripheral place. The closest thing to a heroine is Foulata, the beautiful native girl who falls in love with Captain Good, but she is so stereotypically conceived that modern readers may find her character unconvincing.

Once she has fallen in love with Captain Good, his own high moral character would demand that he reward her devotion, either by remaining with her in the native society, or by marrying her and taking her back with him to England.

Seemingly, the only solution is for her to die—nobly, of course—in order to bring the story to a satisfactory conclusion.

Foulata's sad, but convenient, death frees Captain Good from having to make a very difficult and, for late nineteenthcentury readers, controversial choice.

Discussions of Foulata's character and her role in the story should acknowledge the vast differences between contemporary views of women and those held by Victorian audiences.

The novel also contains some scenes of fairly graphic violence, such as the witch hunt, and the bloody deaths of Twala and Gagool. However, Quatermain's vivid descriptions of this bloodshed are natural expressions of his effort to record important events bluntly

and accurately. Though somewhat lurid, these descriptions are short and effective. The violence is not gratuitous. In fact, given the nature of the story, the number of graphically violent passages is surprisingly small.

Literary Qualities

The book's immense success was the result of Haggard's ability to present such fantastic adventures in a gritty, realistic narrative. Using a first-person point of view, Quatermain tells the story in what he calls a "plain, straightforward manner." In this way, Haggard effectively creates the illusion of an honest record of actual events. Quatermain's credibility as a narrator is further enhanced by the fact that he claims not to be a "literary man." He says that his account lacks the "flights and flourishes" found in novels, thereby further suggesting its factuality.

Haggard's use of language enhances this realistic credibility. The style is simple, direct, and conversational, providing both vivid details of these adventures and Quatermain's occasional insights into their significance. His narrative is interspersed with opinions and prejudices, which provide interesting insights into his own personality.

At different points in his story, Quatermain meditates upon profound philosophical questions: the transitoriness of human life, the power and beauty of nature, the meaning of human relationships. However, though these passages are often poetic, they seem quite spontaneous and emotionally compelling.

Quatermain's bluntness is effectively tempered by his own well-considered experiences and his compassion for other human beings.

Haggard also uses his descriptive power to foreshadow later events, and to express both the beauty and the danger of the environment itself. As Quatermain and his companions march through the desert, Haggard evokes the danger of their environment: The stars grew pale and paler still, till at last they vanished; the golden moon waxed wan, and her mountain ridges stood out clear against her sickly face like the bones on the face of a dying man; then came spear upon spear of glorious light flashing far away across the boundless wilderness, piercing and firing the veils of mist till the desert was draped in a tremulous golden glow, and it was day.

Later in the story, after they encounter the natives of Kukuanaland, Haggard realistically describes vicious battles, bloody deaths, and fiendish treachery.

Many passages are written with a graphic bluntness that heightens the horror of some of the barbaric native ceremonies. One such scene involves a witch hunt presided over by Gagool, the King's grotesque sorceress, who cruelly marks tribesmen for immediate death: With a shriek she sprang in and touched a tall warrior with the forked wand. Instantly, two of his comrades, those standing immediately next to him, seized the doomed man, each by one arm, and advanced with him towards the king.

He did not resist, but we saw that he dragged his limbs as though they were paralyzed, and his fingers, from which the spear had fallen, were as limp as those of a man newly dead.

Other scenes, such as the eerie solar eclipse during which Quatermain tricks the evil king and the frightening episodes in the caves where they discover the diamonds, are brilliantly realistic and chilling.

Themes and Characters

King Solomon's Mines is unified by many meaningful themes, the broadest of which is the struggle between good and evil embodied in the heroes' quest to discover the fate of Sir Henry Curtis's lost brother. Like many heroes of ancient myths, Quatermain and his comrades must overcome obstacles imposed either by the forces of nature (e.g., the merciless heat of the desert, the treacherous cold of the mountains) or by evil powers, embodied in Twala, the usurper king of the Kukuana people, and his hideous sorceress, Gagool.

Though they are somewhat "larger than life," Quatermain, Sir Henry, and Captain Good are not merely embodiments of abstract moral principles. They are depicted as real human beings who find themselves in extraordinary situations. Nevertheless, as Captain Good's name implies, they do represent the forces of "good" in a battle against evil.

The evil characters are unremittingly evil. Neither Twala, his son Scragga, nor Gagool have any redeeming characteristics whatsoever.

Furthermore, the price of the heroes' victory over evil is high. In the course of their expedition, many admirable characters die violently, and Twala's butchery of his own people adds to the atmosphere of sinister violence. In the battles between the armies for control of the kingdom, thousands of men on both sides are slaughtered.

The latter half of the novel is in fact filled with carnage. Death is everywhere, and it becomes a major philosophical theme in the later chapters.

But, in spite of this pessimistic situation, Allan salvages some consolation from his faith that "man dies not while the world remains. His name is forgotten, indeed, but the breath he breathed yet stirs the pine tops on the mountains, the sound of the words he spoke yet echoes on through space; the thoughts his brain gave birth to we have inherited today."

Though he apparently lacks a traditional Christian belief in heaven and hell, Allan's faith in these "inextinguishable and immortal elements of life, which . . . can never die" alleviates some of the hopelessness engendered by the violence and bloodshed surrounding him.

Quatermain believes that humans live in a universe of violent, inexplicable forces over which they have little control.

In this situation, a person's only alternative is to adopt a stoical attitude or, as Sir Henry puts it, to "make the best of it" and to remember that "fortune favors the brave."

Despite such philosophical pessimism, the story emphasizes adherence to a clear moral code. All of the good characters behave honorably, bravely and generously, even

in very difficult situations. Quatermain and his companions are just and moral men, who kill only in self-defense. Their search for the diamond mines of King Solomon is undertaken, not because they are greedy for wealth, but because Sir Henry is risking his own life on an almost hopeless expedition to find his lost brother.

Given the historical period in which the novel was written, it is noteworthy that Quatermain respects integrity, honesty, and bravery as much in black Africans as he does in his white associates. In fact, one of the novel's major themes seems to be that such virtues transcend race, and that heroism is heroism, no matter what the color of one's skin. Haggard came to respect native Africans through personal experience, but his high regard for them was seldom shared by his contemporaries, who tended to view colonial natives as scarcely human.

This is not to say that Haggard believed in equal rights in any contemporary sense. Quatermain's heartfelt admiration of Ignosi, the deposed king, is always tempered by his awareness that they are truly from different worlds.

When the two meet for the last time, Ignosi himself recognizes that "the white man loves not to live on the level of the black." Even Foulata, the native girl who loves Captain Good, realizes that she could never return with him to England.

As she dies, she says she is glad to do so "for the sun cannot mate with the darkness, nor the white with the black."

Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Haggard entitle his book King Solomon's Mines? What do the mines signify to Allan Quatermain, Sir Henry Curtis, and Captain Good? Do their attitudes toward the mines change over the course of the story? How?

2. Discuss the character of the narrator, Allan Quatermain. What is his personality like? What are his virtues?

His vices? Why does he agree to help Sir Henry discover the fate of his brother?

Does his character change from the beginning to the end of the novel?

3. Consider the acts of war and violence which occur in the latter half of the story. Why do the characters fight?

Are their causes just? For what principles or values are they fighting?

4. Discuss specific ways in which the African natives are different from the whites. In what ways are they alike?

5. Which event do you think is the climax of the story? Explain.

6. Imagine that you are producing a film version of King Solomon's Mines.

Which current actors would you cast in the major roles? Explain your choices.

7. How would you describe Allan Quatermain's relationship with Ignosi, the rightful king of the Kukuana people?

How do their attitudes toward one another change in the course of the book?

8. Discuss the ways in which descriptions of nature suggest or emphasize the attitudes or situations of the characters.

9. Is Sir Henry's search for his brother, George, an important element of the plot? Could Haggard have told as good an adventure story without including it?

What purpose does this part of the plot serve?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Which character, from a movie or another story, reminds you of one of the major characters in King Solomon's Mines? Explain your choice.

2. Quatermain's expedition proceeds by following an ancient map said to have been drawn by a Portuguese man named Jose Silvestre. What happened to Silvestre, and what effect does his story have on the general plot of King Solomon's Mines?

3. What role does superstition play in this story? Pick an episode and explain how superstition determines an important development in the plot.

4. Both Twala and Gagool appear to be thoroughly evil characters, but how do they differ? Is one more evil than the other? Why?

5. Which of the episodes in the novel do you think is the most fantastic? Why?

6. What do you think this story would have been like if it had been told by a character other than Allan Quatermain?

Pick a short episode and rewrite it from the point of view of one of the other characters.

For Further Reference

Barker, Ernest. History of the English Novel London: Witherby, 1938. This work provides a general, if somewhat dated, account of Haggard's place in the development of English fiction.

Cohen, Morton. Rider Haggard: His Life and Works. London: Hutchinson, 1960. Though it provides a thorough account of Haggard's life and useful plot summaries of his major works, this literary biography is marred by Cohen's condescending attitude toward his subject.

Darton, F. J. Harvey. Children's Books in England. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932. This work contains useful information about the kind of "boys' stories" Haggard wrote as well as other types of Victorian young adult literature.

Ellis, Peter Berresford. H. Rider Haggard: A Voice From the Infinite. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978. A thorough and sympathetic account of Haggard's life and work, Ellis's book also includes a comprehensive bibliography of Haggard's writings.

Tindall, William York. Forces in Modern British Literature 1881-1946. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947. This general reference work places Haggard's work in its context as part of the development of English fiction.

Related Titles/Adaptations

King Solomon's Mines and She continue to be Haggard's most popular works. Though King Solomon's Mines was published first, it was the latter work, a bizarre, exciting story of a young man's return to Egypt to avenge the death of one of his ancestors, which established Haggard's reputation as a brilliant writer of fantastic tales of adventure.

His other less well known fiction of this type includes Cleopatra, Montezuma's Daughter, The People of the Mist, The Brethren, Ayesha, The Ghost Kings, The Yellow God, Queen Sheba's Ring, The Ivory Child, The Virgin of the Sun, Queen of the Dawn, and Belshazzar. Though some of these stories are loosely based— often very loosely—on historical fact, their success rests primarily on Haggard's ability to create fantastic and exciting situations realistically, in simple forceful prose.

Over the years, Haggard continued the story of Allan Quatermain in six sequels to King Solomon's Mines. He followed Allan Quatermain with Maiwa's Revenge, Allan's Wife, The Ancient Allan, She and Allan, and Allan and the IceGods.

Besides these sequels, King Solomon's Mines has been filmed a number of times, the first being a silent version in 1919. The first talking version, and still the best overall film adaptation, was made in 1936. It starred the great British actor, Sir Cedric Hardwicke, as Allan Quatermain, and the great black American actor Paul Robeson as Ignosi.

Subsequent film versions have been less successful. MGM's 1950 version starred Stewart Granger as a convincing Allan Quatermain and featured excellent cinematography of African scenery and wildlife, including interesting footage of real Zulu warriors. Unfortunately, though exciting, this version takes a number of liberties with Haggard's work, such as replacing the character of Sir Henry Curtis with his sister, Elizabeth, played by Deborah Kerr, who is meant to add a romantic interest which is quite foreign to Haggard's original text. This version also dispenses with the Battle of Loo, one of the most exciting sections of the novel. Nevertheless, this is a very good adventure film, with enough artistic quality and interest to provide students with a worthwhile viewing experience. Unlike later adaptations, it remains true to the spirit (if not the letter) of Haggard's original.

Several recent film adaptations, obviously inspired by Raiders of the Lost Ark, have been less successful. King Solomon's Treasure (1977) should be avoided at all costs. This version is horribly miscast and incorporates battles with dinosaurs into an already ridiculous plot. Richard Chamberlain plays Allan Quatermain in King Solomon's Mines (1985) and in a sequel, Allan Quatermain and the Lost City of Gold (1985). Both of these films are obvious and shoddy attempts to transform Haggard's protagonist into a profitable clone of the highly successful Indiana Jones character. They convey little if any of the spirit of Haggard's work.

Students would benefit from reading King Solomon's Mines and seeing one of the better film versions. Discussing the similarities and differences between the two versions

would be enjoyable and profitable. Interestingly, all of the film versions are less graphically violent than the book itself.

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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotes Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature□Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction□19th century□Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction□20th century□Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3□dc20 96-20771 CIP

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996