

She Short Guide

She by H. Rider Haggard

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Overview

She is one of the most spellbinding adventure stories ever written. From the moment the reader begins Horace Holly's bizarre account of his adventures, the action never stops. King Solomon's Mines revealed Haggard's genius as an adventure writer, but in many ways She far surpasses its predecessor.

Although the plot is highly improbable, Haggard presents the events realistically. The many fantastic episodes are enthralling and, since its first publication, readers have found She a difficult book to put down. The plot is so compressed that the reader is immediately caught up in the exciting adventure of an expedition into the Land of Kor, which is ruled by the mysterious Ayesha (She).

A quest conferred upon Leo Vincey by his father opens the novel on a suspenseful note. Following that, a violent shipwreck, which nearly destroys Leo, his guardian Horace Holly, and their servant Job, is only the first of a long series of increasingly fantastic adventures. Once they arrive in Africa, the plot moves swiftly, and the suspense rapidly increases. Instances of terror and violence abound: attacks by cannibals, eerie native rituals, and the breathtaking journey into the depths of the Caves of Kor to discover the Secret of Life.

However, She's tremendous popularity rests on reasons beyond exciting storytelling. The principal characters, Horace Holly and Ayesha, are both complex and interesting. Holly's philosophical nature prompts him to speculate about the meaning of life, and his own emotional and spiritual conflicts give the story a psychological dimension not usually found in adventure stories. The character of She is one of the great literary puzzles of the nineteenth century. A major part of the interest in reading She is in trying to fathom Ayesha's character. Who, in fact, is she? Has she really discovered the secret of eternal life? Is she a good or an evil character? From what source does she derive her incredible powers? Is her fate meant to teach an important moral lesson about life? By confronting readers with this amazing woman and letting us learn about her through the narrative of the perceptive and philosophical Horace Holly, Haggard creates considerable suspense. In short, the character of She becomes just as stimulating to the reader's imagination as to Horace Holly's.



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 country.

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' Entertainment, 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 Solomon's Mines* and *She*. Although 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 modern 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 takes place during the late nineteenth century, the era the book was written. Horace Holly's account begins in Cambridge, England, where he lives a solitary life as a scholar. As the guardian of his dead friend's son, Leo Vincey, Holly accompanies the handsome young man on his quest to Africa to avenge the death of his ancient ancestor, an Egyptian priest named Kallikrates. Centuries ago Kallikrates had been killed by the goddess Ayesha when he rejected her love for that of another woman. On his twenty-fifth birthday, Leo Vincey learns that, because he is the sole descendant of the ancient family of Kallikrates, it is his duty to "seek out the woman [Ayesha, or She] and learn the secret of Life, and if thou mayest, find a way to slay her." Leo also learns that his own father had tried to carry out these ancient instructions but failed. Leo Vincey, Horace Holly, and their servant.

Job, set out for Africa.

The key to the successful rendering of settings in *She* lies in Haggard's ability to move from the familiar, civilized world of late nineteenth century England to the unfamiliar, fantastic, and even incredible world of Africa, without sacrificing the realistic elements of his narrative. No matter how impossible the story's events become, Haggard presents them in such vivid, realistic detail that they are completely convincing.

Like all great fantasy writers, Haggard has the ability to create marvelous and thoroughly believable imaginary worlds.

Haggard, who had been a member of the British Foreign Service, bases his fictional descriptions on his own firsthand observations of Africa and its peoples. His extensive records of African customs, character studies, animal life, and geography enable him to write detailed, credible descriptions. The journey into Africa's interior is vividly rendered by accounts of animal life (such as the grisly battle to the death between a lion and a crocodile) and of the hardships and disease they encounter as they approach the land of Kor. Eventually they are captured by the members of a tribe known as the Amahagger, who take them to their queen.

The savages refer to their queen as "SheWho-Must-Be-Obeyed." No such tribe as the Amahagger has ever existed, but in describing their physical appearance, which Holly compares to the East African Somali tribe, Haggard undoubtedly draws on the physical appearances of tribesmen he himself had observed. He describes the Amahaggers' peculiar customs regarding male-female relationships and their cannibalistic rituals with equal specificity. Holly's account of these people are both credible and engrossing.

Having entered the Land of Kor, they meet the title character, Ayesha. Once within this world, Holly, Vincey, and Job are increasingly subjected to terrifying and often supernatural powers, ranging from the cannibalistic attacks of the cruel Amhagger tribesmen to the incomprehensible, and apparently magical, powers of Ayesha herself. The grisly realism of the story becomes more pronounced, as in this account of



Horace's battle with two cannibals: "My arms were round the two swarthy demons, and I hugged them till I heard their ribs crack and crunch up beneath my grip.

They twisted and writhed like snakes, and clawed and battered at me with their fists, but I held on." Having survived ordeals like this, Horace and Leo must face even greater dangers in their confrontation with She.

She rules her subjects by sheer terror.

Her labyrinthine world is permeated by violence and death, undoubtedly originating in her murder of her beloved Kallikrates many centuries before. The lost subterranean city of Kor is a bewildering network of caverns which are filled with skeletons, embalming chambers, and mummified corpses. The atmosphere of this underground realm is both claustrophobic and disorienting. It strongly suggests that the characters are imprisoned in an irrational and primitive world where the laws of nature and human reasoning do not apply.

The source of Ayesha's apparent immortality is to be found in a treacherous cave at the center of the Earth, and as the story's conclusion suggests, She herself may not fully comprehend the powers which she claims to control.

With its frightening darkness, violent winds, and treacherous cliffs, the subterranean world of Kor resembles a nightmare in which dreamers have little control over their own destinies. The supernatural forces are simply too strong for them.



Social Sensitivity

Some readers may object to Haggard's depiction of Africans in *She*. With two notable exceptions, Billali and Ustane, members of the Amahagger tribe are evil and cruel. Thus they are stereotypically presented as "dark" and "swarthy" villains in a story where "goodness" seems heavily associated with the white heroes. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the genre in which Haggard was working and the story's setting demanded such convention. Furthermore, it should be emphasized that Haggard's personal experience with actual Africans and their country had given him a deep and abiding respect for their humanity and their cultures. Horace Holly's respect for the Amahagger marriage customs reflects Haggard's own conviction that people of all races were part of a common humanity. Having lived in an imperialistic society, Haggard was remarkably free of the ethnocentrism characteristic of his contemporaries. Later in life he actively campaigned for the preservation of the Zulu culture which was being destroyed by colonialism and tribal wars.

Interestingly, the treatment of women in *She* also offers some interesting departures from the norm for this type of fiction. Typically, the kind of story Haggard was writing was a "boy's book" about a "man's world," in which women were peripheral. However, a major cause of this work's enduring popularity is Haggard's characterization of a powerful—indeed almost omnipotent—woman as the story's main character.

Victorian society typically described women as mothers and homemakers, and very few literary works depicted women with any sort of power at all.

Ayesha must have mystified and even shocked Victorian readers precisely because of her dominant character.

She also contains some graphically violent and horrifying scenes, particularly those involving the encounters with the Amahagger. However, none of this violence seems gratuitous.



Literary Qualities

Even the success of *King Solomon's Mines* did not prepare the English reading public for the imaginative tour de force of *She*. In terms of broader literary traditions, Haggard's story draws on ancient mythic themes, the most obvious of which is the search for spiritual knowledge through a quest. In fact, the Pillar of Flame, which the heroes discover deep in the caves of Kor, embodies "The Spirit of Life" itself. Either literally or symbolically, some type of divine knowledge is often the goal of quests undertaken by heroes of myths.

Unlike many of Haggard's other adventure stories, *She* has a central romantic theme in Ayesha's obsessive love for Kallikrates and Leo. Typically, though, in Haggard's day the term "romance" referred to a story's mysterious and exotic settings, and to the fantastic struggles and obstacles that the hero had to overcome. Characters in a romance usually have powers which exceed those of normal human beings but fall short of the powers of the gods, and this is precisely the nature of the character of Ayesha. In fact, given the magnitude of the obstacles they must overcome to escape destruction, all of the characters in *She* are larger than life.

Haggard's novel is also a good example of a "frame story," a work of fiction in which a narrator, in this case a man we know only as "The Editor," presents the story to the reader. In the "Introduction," this editor tells us that he is simply presenting Horace Holly's account of "one of the most wonderful and mysterious experiences ever undergone by mortal men," just as Holly himself recorded it. Although the editor is only present for a few pages to introduce the story, his preface prepares the reader for Horace Holly's fantastic account. The editor anticipates the reader's skepticism by saying that when he first read Holly's incredible narrative, he was unable to believe that it was literally true.

Instead, he thought it was "some giant allegory of which I could not catch the meaning" or that it was "a bold attempt to portray the possible results of practical immortality." Finally, however, he has decided that, "To me the story seems to bear the stamp of truth upon its face."

Thus, the editor's response to this incredible tale becomes a prediction of the effect Haggard wants his tale to have on the other readers of Holly's account: the belief—even if only while reading—that these fantastic events are true.

Horace Holly's language is appropriate to his character. As a Cambridge scholar, Holly's language is somewhat more polished than that of Allan Quatermain, the rugged adventurer who narrated *King Solomon's Mines*. However, even during his philosophical meditations, Holly's diction and vocabulary remain free of obscure terminology. His style is highly conversational, providing both vivid details of his adventures and insights into their significance. Horace's meditations upon the transitoriness of human life, the power and beauty of nature, or the meaning of human relationships are often poetic, but they seem quite natural and are emotionally compelling.



Haggard's style is equally effective in less philosophical passages. Indeed, one of his greatest strengths as a writer is his directness, particularly in passages such as this horrifying description of Ayesha's death: "She raised herself upon her bony hands, and blindly gazed around her, swaying her head slowly from side to side as a tortoise does. She could not see, for her whitish eyes were covered with a horny film." Such graphic images are characteristic of Haggard's descriptions of violence and death.



Themes and Characters

Since *She* first appeared, critics and readers have analyzed Haggard's tale to discover its deeper meanings. Some critics have argued that the characters are allegorical figures who stand for certain moral values or psychological attitudes. Leo Vincey, Ustane (the native girl who loves him), and Job are common literary stock characters. Leo is the handsome and noble, but not particularly intelligent, young hero. Ustane is the beautiful, self-sacrificing maiden, in love with the hero. However, as her defiance of Ayesha shows, Ustane becomes a far stronger character than many female characters in adventure stories. Job, as his name implies, is the long-suffering servant, who is devoted, honest, and humble. Like his Biblical namesake, he patiently endures the numerous trials of the expedition. As in most such adventure stories, these characters embody certain virtues.

However, because they are all relatively one-dimensional, they are far less interesting than the story's main characters, Horace Holly and Ayesha.

The characters in adventure stories tend to be uncomplicated, largely because the author's emphasis is usually on action. However, by characterizing Horace Holly as a philosophical man deeply concerned with the meaning of life, Haggard is able to introduce a number of meaningful themes without impeding the action. Holly's interest in human motivations and moral questions, and his ability to relate the story's events to some larger religious or philosophical framework give an additional dimension to the action.

Part of the reader's immediate sympathy with Horace Holly stems from Haggard's characterization of him as a man of noble character whose inner life has been one of loneliness and suffering.

At the beginning of the story, readers learn that much of Holly's unhappiness derives from his physical ugliness.

When the native priest, Billali, nicknames him "Baboon," he apparently does so with good reason. Holly's descriptions of himself border on the grotesque, and he has come to believe that he "was set apart by Nature to live alone, and draw comfort from her breast, and hers only. Women hated the sight of me." Although Holly has often been rejected and ridiculed by women and men alike, he elicits sympathy by accepting his ugliness without letting bitterness or resentment corrupt his character.

Nor is this an easy task. Haggard emphasizes Holly's physical ugliness by contrasting it with the almost superhuman beauty of his ward, Leo Vincey, who "looks like a statue of Apollo come to life." Leo is so handsome that women fall in love with him on sight, and when the two walk down the street observers are shocked by the contrast in the two men's appearances. Ironically, this remarkable contrast is heightened by the deep devotion the two men have to one another. Although keenly aware—and even envious—of Leo's superior beauty, Holly always acts in Leo's best interests.



Horace Holly's extreme physical unattractiveness heightens the nobility of his character. By establishing Holly's character as one of great honesty and integrity, Haggard provides an ideal narrator for these improbable adventures.

Readers trust Horace to record events accurately and to tell the truth, without letting his imagination take over. In fact Holly seems to regard the imagination as a disease which prevents man from discovering truth. Therefore, when his rational view of the world is contradicted by the fantastic events of the story, our faith in him as an honest and credible narrator makes the improbable events he recounts all the more startling.

Although he is physically ugly, Holly has been blessed with high intelligence and a talent for intellectual and philosophical inquiry. Ironically, although Ayesha madly loves Leo, she is much closer intellectually to Horace, who is the only character in the story with whom she is able to converse about philosophical and historical questions.

Nevertheless, although she realizes Horace's worth, her obsession with Leo does not diminish. Ayesha remains convinced that he is her lover, Kallikrates, whom she had killed in a fit of jealousy two thousand years before.

Although the novel bristles with the usual themes of adventure stories— suspenseful unravelling of mystery, heroic struggles against the forces of nature, overcoming adversaries through resourcefulness and bravery—Horace's narration provides a reflective intellectual quality which such fiction usually lacks. For instance, Holly muses on the strange "marriage" customs of the Amahagger with something of a sociologist's interest, and expresses an openmindedness toward the native society.

After describing the Amahagger women's custom of frequently changing husbands, Horace comments, "It is very curious to observe how the customs of mankind on this matter [marriage] vary in different countries, making morality an affair of latitude, and what is right and proper in one place wrong and improper in another." Horace believes that there is nothing immoral about this custom, and his tolerance seems to affirm his view that all humans share certain fundamental values.

Holly's philosophical discussions with Ayesha develop one the novel's major themes: the struggle between good and evil. However, Haggard's treatment of this theme is highly ambiguous, largely because of his ambivalent characterization of Ayesha. On one hand she is supernaturally beautiful, and her character is both noble and awe-inspiring.

She has also suffered considerably for murdering Kallikrates centuries before.

She claims to have awaited his return for the last two thousand years, "tormented by the memory of a crime, tortured day and night with an unfulfilled desire—without companionship, without comfort, without death." Thus her extreme longevity (she claims that no power on Earth can provide complete immortality) has been a curse rather than a blessing. Although she did kill Kallikrates, she did so in a fit of jealous rage, and her subsequent guilt and loneliness have been so great that the reader feels sympathy for her.



However, other dimensions of her character are disturbing. Her obsessive love for Leo, whom she believes is the long-dead Kallikrates, drives her to commit acts of considerable cruelty. She strikes Ustane dead because she is her rival for Leo's affections. Ayesha enjoys the immense power she has over these mortals and exults in the fact that she rules the Amahagger through sheer terror. She enjoys the fact that her supernatural beauty drives Horace to fall helplessly in love with her, causing a painful conflict between him and Leo.

Although she seems to admire and even to respect Holly, she taunts him with her refusal ever to love him, knowing that, once he gazes upon the supernatural beauty of her face, he will be tortured by that vision forever.

The negative side of Ayesha's character can best be summarized by saying that she recognizes no universal or natural law except that of her own will. She is totally egocentric, and the "Power of Life" to which she has access makes her dangerous. She seems to embody a power which, as Holly recognizes, could threaten the foundations of human civilization itself. However, Haggard's intent seems to be to make Ayesha so much larger than life that normal human standards of "good" and "evil" do not apply to her, a view which Horace Holly himself comes to embrace at the story's conclusion. Upon reflection, Horace rejects the view that Ayesha's behavior was governed by "evil tendencies" and even excuses her murder of Kallikrates on the grounds that, as queen, she killed a subject who disobeyed her. If there is a moral to this story, it appears to be that for humans to aspire to divine knowledge or power is a sin. Horace Holly attributes Ayesha's horrible end to her arrogant tampering with divine power: "Thus she opposed herself against the eternal Law, and, strong though she was, by it was swept back to nothingness—swept back with shame and hideous mockery!"

Adaptations

She has been filmed a number of times. The first of six silent film versions was made in France in 1919. The first talking version, and still the best overall film adaptation, was made in at RKO Studios in the United States in 1935.

Helen Gahagan starred as the title character. As Haggard's popularity began to wane, fewer films of his work were made, and, since 1935, only four film adaptations have appeared. A 1965 English film, directed by Robert Day, with Ursula Andress as Ayesha and featuring Christopher Lee, Peter Cushing and John Richardson, is an effective remake.

However, this film's sequel, *The Vengeance of She* (1965), bears little relationship to Haggard's story.

Students would benefit from reading *She* and seeing one of the better film adaptations. Discussing the similarities and differences between the two versions would be enjoyable and profitable.

Interestingly, none of the film versions are as bizarre and frightening as the book itself.



Topics for Discussion

1. Although Ayesha (She) is the novel's title character, discuss the possibility that Horace Holly, the narrator, is the real protagonist.

2. Describe Horace Holly's character.

How does it change in the course of novel?

3. Compare Horace with his ward, Leo Vincey. What is the nature of their relationship?

4. Does Ayesha deserve her fate? Why or why not?

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

6. Imagine that you are producing a film version of *She*. Which current actors would you cast in the major roles? Explain your choices.

7. How would you describe Horace's relationship with Ayesha (She). How does their relationship change during the story?

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

9. What does Ayesha see in Leo Vincey? Why does she love him so madly?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What is the nature of the legend which takes Leo, Horace, and Job into the wilds of Africa? Explain how this legend effects their adventures with Ayesha in the Land of Kor.
2. What role does the supernatural play in this story? Pick a supernatural episode and explain how it helps develop the plot.
3. Is there any justification for the way in which Ayesha rules the Amahagger people? Is she a good or an evil queen?
4. What would this story have been like if it had been told by a character other than Horace Holly? Pick a short episode and re-write it from the point of view of one of the other characters.

For Further Reference

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