

Self sacrifice in the moonstone



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In Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*, which is regarded as the first true English detective novel, the story of a priceless Indian diamond is told through a series of changing narrators. The diamond is stolen three times throughout its' recorded history: the first time by Muslim invaders from its' rightful Indian owners, the second time by an Englishman by the name of John Herncastle, and the third time mysteriously; this is the incident which the work covers in detail because who and how the diamond was stolen from Herncastle's niece is unknown. The moonstone seemingly holds a great power over the characters in the novel; wherever it is taken, people are compelled to forfeit their lives, and the lives of others, in the name of it. Running parallel to this is the love life of Franklin Blake and the two women, Lady Rachel and Rosanna, who give up parts of their lives in his name and to be with him. Two sets of parallels run within the novel and it's motif of sacrifice; the moonstone and Franklin Blake similarly compel others to give things up in their name, and Rachel Verinder and Rosanna Spearman both sacrifice the same parts of their life despite being opposites socially. The sacrifices which the characters of the novel make do not always work in their favor; sometimes they advance their motives, and other times they cause setbacks. Self sacrifice is used both to the detriment and betterment characters in the work, as shown through the Indian's disguises, Lady Rachel's exodus from her home, and Rosanna's suicide.

Within the novel, self-sacrifice on the part of the three Indian holy men, or Brahmins, is evident from the prologue and onward. After the moonstone was first removed from the head of their moon god's statue they were commanded with the task of watching the diamond," from that time forth, by

three priests in turn, night and day, to the end of the generations of men.” (Collins 11) For the Brahmins, the consequences of their devotion to the moon god seem to be perpetually detrimental. Their divine direction called for them to leave their homeland and to lower their class from men of high standing into servants of the rich and powerful, all so that they and their descendants could keep a close watch over the stone. Cathrine Peters laments the Brahmins’ fates by writing, “ Few will read *The Moonstone* without feeling the tears rise in their eyes as they catch the last glimpse of the three men, who have sacrificed their caste in the service of their God.”(306-07) The trio’s legacy does paint a heartbreaking image; the descendants of the original priests would be obligated to follow through with the mission that their forbearers could not achieve, their lives forfeit, all for the sake of a rock. But this concept is immaterial, and occurs before the timeframe of Collins’ work, so it is more conceptual than the other sacrifices they made.

The first tangible sacrifice that the Indians make is the death of the three priests that guarded the stone when John Herncastle was looting the Sultan’s palace within the prologue. Herncastle was enamored by the history and legends of the moonstone, so during the ransacking he stole away to the treasury to retrieve it. The Brahmins attempted to defend the stone from being taken once again, yet still ended up being gutted by the dagger which itself held the diamond. In the face of death itself, the men still put the fate of the moonstone before their own; these particular Brahmins had their lives sacrificed twice over, for when the original priests chose to follow the orders

of their god, then they gave up all the lives of their descendants. Their death was the second sacrifice.

As the novel progresses, the next generations of Indians make continually harder sacrifices. The moonstone is taken to England, so the Brahmins follow. In order to remain conspicuous they lower their social standing even further by pretending to be men “ who had forfeited their caste in the service of their god the god had commanded that their purification should be the purification by pilgrimage.” (385) Social class is another prominent motif within the work, and the sacrifice of it causes one of the Indians’ more major set backs; when attempting to enter the Verinder residence, the lower class servants are suspicious of the Brahmins’ behavior, which Tamar Heller aptly describes as “ shady and sinister,” (145) while the high class residents are not because they do not know what is normal behavior for the lower class. This results in the trio being thrown into jail for almost the majority of the work. So not only does the lowering of class set back their personal lives, but also the mission that they are embarked on. In the words of Philip O’Neill, the Brahmins sacrifices aid in “ heightening our interest in the ultimate fate of the Moonstone.” (220-21) These sets of men sacrificed the whole of their lives for the sake of their god, but all of these negative circumstances do not devalue the positive outcome of the Brahmins’ sacrifices, for in the end they do achieve what was always their ultimate goal: retrieving the moonstone and restoring it to their god.

The moonstone has an almost magnetic and compelling personality, and extreme action is taken in its’ name. Kenneth Robinson believes the stone to be so disruptive and forcible in nature that he asserts that “ the diamond
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seems a living thing.” (219) If the moonstone is therefore personable to be considered alive, then only one character can come close in rivaling it in terms of having people giving up things in their name: this would be Franklin Blake. Franklin Blake is an man of high class and abounding charm. While Blake does not have generations of men following him around in the name of divine providence, he somehow manages to have women of both high-born and low-born give up their lives and more for his sake. Also similarly to the moonstone, the man has a death count associated with his character. Both the women compelled by Blake know of his guilt in the theft of the diamond, but they still shield him from the repercussions of his actions by offering themselves up in his place. Lady Rachel Verinder gives up her reputation in the eyes of high society and her growing relationship with Blake out of love for the man as well as her home. Rosanna Spearman sacrifices her reputation in the eyes of her employers and her romantic delusions about Blake for the same reasons as Lady Verinder. Both come under suspicion in the eyes of the law for him. Rosanna’s offerings to Blake are far more tragic however because the love she proffered to the man was unrequited and ended in her untimely death, yet the two women’s stories are still similar by design. “ Although Rachel and Rosanna appear to be rivals for Blake’s affections, these women from vastly different class backgrounds thus are also doubles, linked by a desire to serve the man they love that ensures their silence about his role in the theft.” (Heller 147) Rachel and Rosanna are different sides of the same coin, and they both are compelling observations of self sacrifice in the novel.

Lady Rachel Verinder is described by Philip O'Neill to be “ a woman of intelligence and spirit, fully in command of her situation.” (222) Rachel is an example of a woman from a period in which she was expected to let the men around her make her decisions, yet she does not. This is one of her most notable characteristics because it sets her apart from her contemporaries. While other women would have been targeted and shamed for having autonomy, she turns it into an admirable quality; she has men that would otherwise disapprove of her character say, “ The self-dependence in her character, was one of its virtues in my estimation.” (Collins 225) Lady Rachel's independence is not always beneficial; the trait manages to manifest itself by leading her to keep important information to herself. More specifically, it led to her keeping the fact that Franklin Blake was responsible of the theft of the moonstone a secret. She knew what the repercussions of not sharing this information would be because she is not an unintelligent person; she knew that she would be the first to come under the suspicion of the police if the thief were to not be found. She saw Blake commit the theft first hand and because of her title and high-standing, no one would have contested her if she said he was guilty. Even so, because of her independence, intelligence, and devotion to keep Franklin Blake safe, the Lady allowed her reputation to be dragged through the mud. If she was the subject of people's accusations, Franklin would be left in peace, so she sacrificed her public image.

What Rachel did not know, however, was that Blake was not in full control of his faculties when he committed the crime, and because he was of a high moral standing, he felt obligated to assist in the investigation of the theft.

We are not given a first hand account of Rachel's point of view, but near the end of the work, when Blake confronts Rachel about the crime, she tells him that " I have suffered the consequences of concealing it."(Collins 339) After taking the blame for his crime, she had to also endure through the pain of seeing the people closest to her believe that she was guilty, including Blake. It was such a burden on her mind to suffer through these accusations that she was forced to leave home as well. Rachel's mother moved her to their London house so that Rachel would be away from the activity in her country home, which caused her to have depressive episodes every time the diamond was mentioned. So not only was she mentally damaged by being treated so badly by her friends, family, and even complete strangers, but she was also forced to give up her long-term home in Blake's name. Moving away from her home also facilitated in the growing divide between Rachel and Blake. Before the stone was stolen, the pair were beginning to develop a romantic attachment to one another. Rachel knew she had to separate herself from Blake once she started to be investigated so as to divert all attention away from him. When she sacrificed her home, not only did she quit speaking to Franklin, but she also took up a relationship with another man named Godfrey Ablewhite. So not only did Rachel sacrifice her character and the security of her home for Franklin, she also gave up their budding romance for him.

Franklin Blake was still ultimately ungrateful for all that Rachel did for him because he was unaware of purpose of her actions. He did not even know of the crime he committed until she was forced to tell him about it, so it would have been impossible for him to even think that she was pushing him away

and ruining her public image purposefully and for his benefit. Catherine Peters affirms to us that “ Whether they are gullible and absurd, vindictive and man-hating, or loyal, courageous and intelligent, women are all, rich and poor alike, at the mercy of men’s actions and attitudes,” (305) and Rachel is at the mercy of Blake because she gave so much of herself up for him. Ultimately, like the Brahmins, the good and bad Lady Rachel suffered and sacrificed in Blake’s name did bear fruit; her goal of protecting Blake from the law was fulfilled. The Lady suffered extensively, yet still came out lucky because she and Blake were reunited in the end. Much less can be said for Rosanna Spearman however, for her luck ran dry from her beginning to her end.

Rosanna’s sacrifices are analogous to Lady Rachel’s because they both are vying for the same outcome; they both want to protect Franklin Blake because they love him. Yet, all the things that Rosanna gives up weigh heavier on the mind; Blake happened to love Rachel Verinder back, and he never noticed Rosanna’s feelings. Rosanna was born into poverty, afflicted with a deformity, and troubled by her criminal past. She was everything that Rachel, and Franklin, were not. Why should he have noticed her? Rosanna loved the man regardless, and her hopeless plight to catch Blake’s eye casts a veil of sympathy over the reader’s eyes; one feels sorry for the girl, and anger towards the man. Cathrine Peters condemns Blake for his blindness towards the girl by saying, “ his inability to confront the reality of Rosanna’s love makes the reader indignant” (310). So the sacrifices that Rosanna makes are all the more tragic.

The first of Rosanna's sacrifices was diverting the attentions of the law onto herself. She destroyed a nightgown that would have implicated Blake as the guilt party, and replaced it by sewing an identical one using materials that she paid for despite not being able to afford them. Rosanna, like Rachel, also kept the knowledge of Blake's guilt to herself throughout the brunt of the investigation while simultaneously facing the wrath of the police for the diamond's theft in Blake's place. Her interrogation was taken much further than Lady Rachel's however, because Rosanna did in fact have a criminal past; the detectives working the case thought Rosanna to be the culprit initially, and did not relinquish this belief until after Rosanna's demise, and only after that did they move on to believing that Rachel was the guilty party.

The next of Rosanna's sacrifices was her employment. Because Rosanna was believed to be the culprit of the theft, she was scorned by her fellow employees and employer. Rachel's mother, the elder Lady Verinder, initially took Rosanna in despite her unlawful past without judgment and even kept it a secret from the other staff. The Lady favored Rosanna too because she acted more befitting than the other servants. Once accusations started to fly towards Rosanna, the esteem the Lady held towards the servant disappeared; she allowed the other servants to verbally abuse Rosanna and turned the woman away personally. So, by defending Franklin Rosanna lost her good standing in the Verinder household and was forced to withstand brutal accusations and investigation regarding the moonstone's theft, yet none of these sacrifices stand close to the final offering Rosanna made for Blake; parallel to Rachel, she also sacrificed her "relationship" with Blake.

Despite Franklin's obliviousness to Rosanna's infatuation, she still attempted to fall into his good graces. Blake's compulsive personality drew Spearman to him and planted seeds of obsession in her mind. She even admits to him that, " My work, sir, was to make your bed, and to put your room tidy. It was the happiest hour I had in the whole day. I used to kiss the pillow on which your head rested all night" (Collins 260). She, being lower class and physically abnormal, could never have a real relationship with the man in the time frame of Collins' work, but Rosanna still sadly fantasizes that Blake could love her back. Because of the poor quality of her life, caused by her aforementioned job, social status, and personal shortcomings, the imaginings Spearman has about Blake are the last fulfilling aspects in her life. By hiding the evidence against Franklin, being accused of stealing the diamond, and losing the respect of the Verinder house are the both best and worse things that ever happened to Rosanna; Blake finally acknowledged her, yet it was only to reject her and admit, " I take no interest whatever in Rosanna Spearman." (Collins 123) So, by saving Blake from certain arrest, Rosanna gave up the only happiness she had left in life. This quick remark from Blake was the last nail in Rosanna's coffin, and she threw herself off a cliff and into the sea out of grief and loss. Rosanna did not sacrifice her life for Blake, like she sacrificed her reputation and fictionalized relationship, but her death was a consequence of her sacrifices, as well as " tragically unnecessary" (Peters 310).

Lady Rachel and Rosanna are foil characters for each other; they are complete opposites used to highlight particular traits in the comparative characters. Rachel comes from opulence and wealth, was raised to be well

mannered and gentle, and is traditionally beautiful. Rosanna was raised lower-class, had to work as a criminal in order to support herself, and is plain faced and has a malformed spine. Rachel's fineness is used to accentuate Rosanna's crude qualities. In turn, the readers of the work are meant to measure the sympathy we feel towards Rosanna for her pitiful situation to the lack of compassion we feel towards Rachel, for Rachel did suffer, but hardly in comparison to her servant. No two women were ever less alike, yet they still have common points. They both loved Franklin Blake, both were willing to sacrifice their reputations for him, both shielded him from accusations of a crime, and both gave up their relationships with him for his sake. Cathrine Peters remarks that, " Rachel and Rosanna are individually, not collusively, guilty, though only of shielding the man that they both love," (305) They did not work together while protecting Blake, but they did it for the same reason. Despite being polar opposites, they still share the same ambitions and work to achieve their goals in similar ways.

The Moonstone is a story about loss and what you can gain from it. It's conclusion is surprisingly optimistic and satisfying for the reader because the mystery is solved, the lovers are reunited, and the diamond is restored. Critics claim the novel to be " the most tightly constructed and best worked-out of all his (Collins) novels." (Peters 304) Sacrifice is a compelling motif within the work; it causes generations of men to chase a sacred gemstone over continents, and women to mar their reputations, immaculate or not, in the name of love. For the Brahmin Indians, their generational sacrifices of class status and life end well, for the work ends with their religious quest completed and the moonstone returned to the forehead of their moon god.

For Lady Rachel Verinder, the sacrifices of her home, public image, and love life also ended in her favor because the man she gave everything up for still loved her in the end. The tragic exception to the happy endings is Rosanna Spearman, who in parallel to Lady Rachel also gave up her image and “love life” was left rejected and took her own life because of it. In conclusion, whether it was to protect the man they loved, or to obey holy commands, sacrifice both led to positive and negative outcomes for the characters of the Brahmins, Lady Rachel Verinder, and Rosanna Spearman in *The Moonstone*.