

Moses and sir
galahad: deciphering
biblical and arthurian
allusions in the
lonely...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In *The Lonely Londoners* by Samuel Selvon, Moses and Henry Oliver fight to overcome the discrimination they suffer due to prejudice in London towards immigrants. As insidious as the American South's notoriously overt racism, London's covert racism influences Moses's critical view of London and forces Henry Oliver to come to terms with the flaws of his new city. Through artful allusions, Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* anchors Moses' characterization in biblical history and Henry Oliver's characterization in Arthurian legend. Consequently, the novel constructs a poignant illustration of how the oppressive environment of 1950s London affects Moses's and Henry Oliver's lives.

Like his biblical counterpart, Moses's altruism and his authoritative voice contribute to his characterization as a caretaker. According to the Hebrew Bible, Moses valiantly led the Exodus of Israelites from 400 years of slavery in Egypt across the Red Sea to Mount Sinai where he received the Ten Commandments from God. Similarly, Selvon's Moses leads immigrants who escaped the economic bondage of the West Indies for the Mother Country. In this particular narrative, "it is the same soft heart that have [Moses] now on the bus to Waterloo to meet a fellar name Henry Oliver. He don't know how he always getting in position like this, helping people out" (25). Selvon's Moses expresses reluctance like that which the biblical Moses felt when God called on him through the burning bush to lead the Israelites. Despite his reluctance, Selvon's Moses aids all of the young men who come to him. He does not claim to follow God's will like the biblical Moses does. In effect, Selvon highlights his Moses's virtue by presenting a "soft heart" or morality as his incentive rather than divine intervention. Moses's altruism stems

directly from his experience with racism in London which he expounds upon in later dialogue.

Just as Moses in the Bible serves as an authoritative voice for God's Word for His followers, Moses in *The Lonely Londoners* serves as an authoritative voice for a critique of racism in London for his fellow immigrants. By aligning Moses with his biblical namesake, Selvon establishes Moses's accountability and builds upon our preconceived notions of the Moses archetype to create a sagacious character. In particular, Moses's wisdom emerges in his conversations with Henry Oliver. After Moses picks up Henry Oliver from Waterloo, Henry bombards Moses with questions about London. Moses cautions him to "' take it easy...you will find out for yourself before long'" (Selvon 36). Moses emphasizes learning through experience, implying that he knows more about London since he has lived there longer. He distinguishes himself as an authority on London and uses his license to speak candidly about London's racial tensions. At one point, Moses differentiates the covert racism in London from the overt racism in America. He explains, "' in America they don't like you, and they tell you straight, so that you know how you stand...In America you see a sign telling you to keep off, but over here you don't see any...they will politely tell you to haul-or else give you the cold treatment'" (40). Moses depicts Americans' forthright racism as preferable to London's passive aggression. To American readers like myself, this explanation is contrary to the perpetuated falsehood that Britain was more socially progressive than America due to its relatively early abolishment of the slave trade in 1807 and slavery as a whole in 1833 (The National Archives). Like Henry, American readers may be skeptical of

Moses's explanation and wonder if this covert racism is in fact more detrimental than overt racism. Regardless of one's individual conclusion, Moses's statement demonstrates London's negative impact on him. Thereby, Moses acts as a knowledgeable guide for both Henry Oliver and the readers through the racial landscape of London.

While Moses's characterization illustrates the aftermath of systemic discrimination, Henry Oliver's character development in *The Lonely Londoners* shows the process through which London's hostile environment diminishes immigrants' morale. Upon meeting Henry Oliver, Moses dubs him "Sir Galahad" (Selvon 35). In Arthurian legend, Sir Galahad was the son of Lancelot and was known as "the purest and noblest knight in King Arthur's court" (Currin). The idea of knighthood alone alludes to the Middle Age principles of chivalry, and so Henry's association with the highest representation of these ideals beckons readers to deduce its significance. From Moses's point of view, this ironic moniker highlights Henry's foolhardiness rather than his bravery. He sees Henry as the "kind of fellow who does never like people to think they unaccustomed to anything, or that they are strangers in a place, or that they don't know where they going" (38). In other words, Henry's eagerness strikes Moses as arrogance given his ignorance of the societal complexities in London. On the other hand, Henry bears some resemblance to Sir Galahad when he tells Moses: "'I know you mean well telling me all these things, but papa, I want to find out for myself'" (41). Though brash, Henry's persistence exhibits his gallant desire for adventure. Like an Arthurian knight, Henry refuses to allow the odds to discourage him.

Once Henry Oliver ventures out into London, his courage dissipates. Subsequently, Sir Galahad's cultural significance provides a telling contrast to Henry's character. On his way to secure a job, Henry finds himself overwhelmed by this foreign environment. Around him, Henry saw " a kind of fog hovering...sun shining, but Galahad never see the sun look like how it looking now. No heat from it, it just there in the sky like a force-ripe orange. When he look up, the colour of the sky so desolate it make him more frighten" (Selvon 42). The insertion of " Galahad" here rather than Henry's actual name establishes further how Henry's fear is the exact antithesis of Sir Galahad's legacy (42). Nevertheless, Selvon seems to justify Henry's cowardice by depicting the atmosphere's hostility. He places the reader inside Henry's consciousness in order for her to better understand the malevolent, deterministic forces at work against him. Thankfully, Moses appears to save Henry, who is " so relieved to see Moses that he putting his hands on his shoulders like they is old pals" (43). This fortuitous reunion serves two purposes. Firstly, it harkens back to Moses's alignment with the biblical Moses as a caretaker, and secondly, it displays Henry's newfound gratitude for Moses's experience. While Henry Oliver may not exhibit Arthurian bravery, his cordial acceptance of Moses's guidance after this instance demonstrates his chivalrous nature. All in all, Henry's interaction with London's antagonism molds him into a more receptive pupil of Moses's tutelage.

In age and temperament alone, Moses and Henry Oliver foil each other, providing a conflict which propels *The Lonely Londoners* forward. Moses's embodiment of his namesake in comparison to Henry's more ironic

association with Sir Galahad both strengthens their characterizations and underscores their differences. Their differing characterizations allow the reader to observe the detrimental effect of covert racism in London as well as the compassion it breeds in immigrants for one another as they fight to transcend discrimination.

Works Cited

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