THE CAPTAIN'S LAST LOVE

William Wilkie Collins

Analysis by Valérie Tosi

Short Story

William W. Collins' short story "The Captain's Last Love" (1876) follows a British sea captain who violates a sacred Polynesian island and loses his beloved when a volcano erupts and the taboo island sinks into the Ocean. In this tale, the volcano symbolizes nature's resistance to colonial intrusion. Its eruption represents the catastrophic consequences of imperial hubris and the moral collapse beneath empire's façade of progress.

Year of Publication	1876
Publication Place	London
Editor	Unspecified
Magazine	Spirit of the Times

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Volcanic eruption

LITERARY EVENT

Time	19th century [1800-1900]
Location	unspecified
Coordinates	-17.693703, -149.437631
Impacted Areas	a volcanic island; a tabooed holy island
Emphasis Phase	Pre-disaster (causes / context), Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics)
Base/Complex	a newly discovered island in the Pacific Ocean
Volcanic Risk Ref.	Referenced

Typology

Other

Volcano/Eruption Typology	Terrestrial
Anthropization Level	Settlements
Ecological Impacts	Earthquake, Atmospheric Changes, Tsunami, Physical Landscape Changes
Social Impacts	Deaths, Trauma

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	The Captain
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	England
Nationality	English
Reactions	Unawareness, Disregard, Calm, Underestimation

Name	Mr. Duncalf
Age	Old
Gender	Male
Native Place	England
Nationality	English
Reactions	Caution, Unease, Apprehension

Name	Aimata
Age	Young Woman
Gender	Female
Native Place	Pacific Islands
Nationality	Indigenous
Reactions	Awareness, Awe, Superstition, Fear

Name	The Chief Of The Island
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Pacific Islands
Nationality	Indigenous
Reactions	Awareness, Superstition, Awe

Name	The Indigenous Sorcerer-priest
Age	Old

Gender	Male
Native Place	Pacific Islands
Nationality	Indigenous
Reactions	Fear, Prayer, Superstition, Awareness, Awe

Reactions

Name	The Captain
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	England
Nationality	English
Reactions	Escape, Surrender, Loss Of Consciousness, Terror, Trauma, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Name	The Chief Of The Island
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Pacific Islands
Nationality	Indigenous
Reactions	Alarm, Escape, Fight For Survival, Terror, Cooperation

Name	The Indigenous Sorcerer-priest
Age	Old
Gender	Male
Native Place	Pacific Islands
Nationality	Indigenous
Reactions	Immobility, Prayer, Fatalism

Name	Aimata
Age	Young Woman
Gender	Female
Native Place	Pacific Islands
Nationality	Indigenous
Reactions	Immobility, Surrender, Passiveness

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	White people
Reactions	Unawareness, Underestimation

Name	Indigenous people
Reactions	Awareness, Awe

Affects/Reactions

Name	White people
Reactions	Escape, Survival Instinct

Name	Indigenous people
Reactions	Escape, Survival Instinct

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	William Wilkie Collins, Imperial Gothic, Volcanic Island, Tribal Taboo, Colonialism, Exoticism, Civilizing Mission, Hubris
Metaphors	"The mounting fires lit the solitary sea" (Collins 353) "the roar of the distant eruption" (Collins 353)
Similes	"a roar like the explosion of a park of artillery" (Collins 352)
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Locus Amoenus, Locus Horridus, Deified Nature, Gods, Fire, Death, Civilisation, Colonisers, Superstition, Prophecy, Violation Of Taboos, Hubris, Supernatural
Syntax	Simple Sentences
Punctuation	No Peculiarities

“The Captain’s Last Love” is a short story by William Wilkie Collins originally published in the American weekly newspaper *Spirit of the Times* in December 1876. Retitled “Mr Captain and the Nymph”, it was published in the London illustrated literary magazine *Belgravia* in January 1877; later, it appeared with the same title in the collection *Little Novels* (1887).

From a narratological perspective, it "is a sea story of navigation […] enclosed within a narrative frame set in England" (Costantini 119). This framed tale deals with the story of an unnamed captain who has relinquished the command of his vessel withdrawing into a life of solitude ashore. Since his last voyage, a strange and bitter aversion to the sea and to marriage has taken root within him, arousing the curiosity of his acquaintances. The captain's tragic story is told by a friend of his to entertain a group of ladies who are gossiping about his surliness and eccentric behaviour.

Years earlier, while commanding the ship *Fortuna* in search of sandal wood in the Pacific Ocean, the captain discovered an uncharted island where he and his crew came across a community of friendly Indigenous people. Talking with one of the chief's sons, he learned of a smaller, forbidden holy island, not far from the main island, which was inhabited only by a priest and his legendarily beautiful daughter Aimata. While inspecting that island through his telescope, he caught a glimpse of her, and decided to secretly sail to the island, violating a tribal taboo that prevented anyone from setting foot on its ground. Once there, he met Aimata, and the two fell in love, though an Indigenous prophecy warned that a foreign intruder would bring destruction to the island and its people. As earthquakes and ominous signs of volcanic activity became apparent, the captain resolved to take Aimata away and make her his wife, but a catastrophic eruption made the island sink beneath the sea. Aimata was lost, and though the captain survived, he never overcame the sorrow of losing his beloved Indigenous nymph.

The initial reference to the main island as an idyllic *terra nullius* evokes a sense of discovery of a new and unexplored territory awaiting to be mapped – and thus controlled – by imperial agents:

a glorious green island, not marked in the ship's charts—an island girt about by a coral-reef, and having in its midst a high-peaked mountain which looked, through the telescope, like a mountain of volcanic origin. (Collins 336)

The historical context depicted in the text reflects the era of imperial expansion. For English colonial explorers, unfamiliar lands were often romanticized and viewed from an exotic, idealized perspective. The description of the island, its volcanic peak, and the use of scientific instruments like the telescope to inspect the landscape highlights the colonizers' tendency to appropriate foreign territories conceptually before physically invading them.

Michael Hollington provided an insightful comparative reading of Collins' first novel, *Iolani; or, Tahíti as it was* (1844-45) and "The captain's Last Love", investigating the theme of British imperial expansion overseas and Collins' treatment of the *topos* of eros and thanatos in relation to his use of the Gothic mode. According to Hollington, what characterises the 1876 short story compared to the previous *romance*, is a better control of the exotic material, which is reworked through the lens of irony to provide "self-conscious critical commentary on male European fantasies of conquest and domination in the South Seas" (99). The main source for *Iolani* was William Ellis' four-volume *Polynesian Researches during a Residence of nearly Eight Years in the Society and Sandwich Islands* (1832–1834). This book, present in Collins's library, "is the origin of the plot as well as the characters of Ioláni" (Nadel xxii), and it probably inspired the setting of "The Captain's Last Love" too. Indeed, in his travelogue, Ellis reported that the captain of his vessel had sailed to the Marquesas Islands – which are Polynesian volcanic islands – in search of sandalwood (3: 366), like the unnamed captain in Collins's short story. Furthermore, Collins "found himself greatly attracted to the sensational, Gothic, and dramatic aspects of the Tahitian society Ellis recounted" (Nadel xxiii). The name Aimata too is borrowed from Ellis, who mentioned her becoming the queen of Tahiti in 1827.

In Collin's tale, after the captain and his crew have landed, they are welcomed by the islanders, who – according to an idealized view of Polynesia rooted in eighteenth-century travel writing and adventure novels *à la Stevenson* – are represented as noble savages and infantilized. As Nadel points out, "The reports of Captain Samuel Wallis, the first European to set eyes on Tahiti in June 1767, suggested parallels between the Tahitians and the ancient Greeks, viewed by the eighteenth century as gifted children who lived at the dawn of civilization" (xix).

Regarding the exotic setting, while from the sea the island is described as a "glorious green" spot (336), at close distance is defined by Mr. Duncalf "a beastly green strip of a place" (337); these contrasting attributes pave the way for a critique of the Western utopian island imagination, which is

also carried out through elements pertaining to the Imperial Gothic mode, such as the combination of "scientific, progressive, often Darwinian ideology of imperialism with an antithetical interest in the occult" (Brantlinger 227), "supernatural or paranormal" phenomena, "apocalyptic themes and images" (230), and "the waning of opportunities for heroic adventures" (239).

In Collins's short story, the volcano on the main island is depicted as it appears in the eyes of the captain:

The one barren spot in it was the peak of the volcanic mountain, composed of crumbling rock; originally no doubt lava and ashes, which had cooled and consolidated with the lapse of time. So far as he could see, the crater at the top was now an extinct crater. But, if he had understood rightly, the chief had spoken of earthquakes and eruptions at certain bygone periods, some of which lay within his own earliest recollections of the place. (337)

The physical description of the volcanic mountain suggests that it has not erupted for a long period. However, the word "extinct" is relativized by the narrator's recognition that past eruptions and earthquakes have occurred "at certain bygone periods". These historical references complicate the notion that the volcano is completely harmless. While it may appear quiescent, the memory of previous eruptions suggests a sense of lingering danger, a reminder that volcanoes can remain dormant for unpredictable periods of time before suddenly becoming active again, following cyclical patterns. The narrator uses expressions such as "So far as he could see" and "if he had understood rightly" to underline how the captain's unawareness of volcanic risk depends on two factors: the limits of the senses and the misinterpretation of a foreign language. This passage reflects a deeper colonial mindset that often underestimated the complexities of foreign realities, both in terms of natural forces and indigenous episteme, revealing the dangers of colonial arrogance and the limitations of knowledge when disconnected from firsthand experience.

The seismic activity, which ultimately brings about the catastrophe, begins only after the captain has violated the native taboo by stepping onto the Holy Island where Aimata lives with her father. In his *Polynesian Researches*, Ellis maintained that "South Sea Islanders [were] under the influence of dread from imaginary demons or supernatural beings" (1: 379); building on these ethnographic considerations, Collins describes the fulfillment of a Polynesian prophecy about the destruction of the island by an evil being appeared on its shores. According to Costantini, by developing the *topos* of the Indigenous prophecy, Collins serves two key purposes: first, he creates a sensational plot by evoking the presence of powerful, unseen forces "whose agency transcends human understanding and control"; second, he emphasizes the limits of Western rationalism: indeed, in this short story, Polynesian knowledge, intertwined with myths and religious beliefs, is "less fallacious than the British attitude of disenchantment and self-indulgence" (122). A third aim seems to emerge in Collins's sensational narrative: by representing a character that interferes with Indigenous practices and beliefs to the point that his actions result in the obliteration of their world, the author casts a shadow on the purported 'civilizing' mission promoted by the imperial ideology, presenting an example of the detrimental effects of on Indigenous territories and people. Costantini maintains that the captain's "ideological and actantial incongruities" and his "ambiguities […] in his personal relations with the natives" are indicative of the "aporias and hypocrisies" of colonial expansion (123) criticized by Collins.

When the volcano's awakening causes atmospheric changes, Indigenous people go ashore "looking suspiciously at the sky", while the captain ignores the causes of the oppressive heat and "the ominous appearances in the western heaven" (342); only when a first shock of earthquake shakes the ground under his feet, he asks himself whether he "ha[s] been mistaken in supposing the crater to be extinct" and "the shock that he had just felt [was]a warning from the volcano, communicated through a submarine connection between the two islands" (347). In this passage, the volcano is personified as a guardian spirit or custodian of the island, able to convey messages. By calling the earthquake a "warning," the narrative implies that the volcano is capable of moral intervention, signaling danger to those who trespass upon the island's tabooed spaces. Furthermore, Collins combines fiction with geological knowledge concerning the relationship between volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and tsunamis. Perhaps, he drew on reports on the 1815 eruption of Tambora, such as Owen Phillips' account, or Sir Thomas Stamford Bingley Raffles' *History of Java* (1817).

Regarding the characters' perception of volcanic risk, the captain's sense of apprehension is described as "vague" (347). Only after a second shock of earthquake, when a line of smoke becomes visible through the telescope, he realizes that the volcano is threatening an eruption. By contrast, Mr. Duncalf – a member of the *Fortuna*'s crew – is "warned to be cautious" (342) by the early ominous phenomena, since he smells a "mischief in the air" (342).

The description of the early stages of the eruption is reminiscent of Pliny the Younger's account in his letters to Tacitus, and of William Hamilton's description of volcanic lightnings in his *Observations on Campi Flegrei* (1776), as emerges in the following passages: "The thin line of smoke, seen rising from the peak of the mountain that evening, was now succeeded by ominous flashes of fire from the same quarter, intermittently visible" (349); "Nothing moved but the reflected flashes of the volcano on the mainland over the black sky. It was an airless and awful calm […] Smoky flame-light overspread the sky" (352). In this excerpt, the volcanic blaze is metaphorically a sort of divine script written across the sky: the gods are literally "speaking" through light and fire, warning against the violation of ancestral taboos.

The dramatisation of the natives' reaction to the beginning of the eruption highlights how survival instinct and concern for family members and personal belongings in context of impending disasters are common to all civilisations, from the most primitive to the most developed ones: "The fire-flashes from the mountain, visible when the night came, had struck terror into the hearts of the men of the watch. They thought of their wives, their children, and their possessions on the main island, and they one and all deserted their Priest" (350). While the islanders abandon their spiritual guide to his dire fate, the crew of the *Fortuna* makes efforts to rescue their missing leader.

When the volcano on the main island bursts into a state of eruption, the captain becomes conscious that the tabooed island "was sinking – slowly, slowly sinking into volcanic depths, below even the depth of the sea! […] Thrown up to the surface by occult volcanic influences, the island had sunk back, under the same influences, to the obscurity from which it had emerged!" (353). Once again, the author combines fiction with geological knowledge concerning the volcanic origin of some Pacific Islands, perhaps building on Ellis's *Polynesian Researches.* However, the geological explanation is immediately inflected with Gothic tones: volcanic forces are not presented as mere natural phenomena but as "occult", mysterious, and punitive agents.

The captain is left alone on a small boat floating in water vortex, his condition being that of a man at the mercy of the forces of a hostile nature:

Alone, amid the savage forces of Nature in conflict, the miserable mortal lifted his hands in frantic supplication—and the burning sky glared down on him in its pitiless grandeur, and struck him to his knees in the boat. His reason sank with his sinking limbs. (353)

In the face of cataclysmic events, not only is the captain as helpless as the islanders, but he also loses the use of his rational faculties and copes with traumatic memories for the rest of his life. Regarding his lost nymph, Costantini observes that Collins's short story builds on "the identification of the exotic territory with a sexualized feminine body", since "the image of Aimata, who is seduced by her white suitor, mirrors the image of the island violated by the protagonist, whose 'aggression' ends up with the annihilation of both his conquests (geographical and sexual)" (Costantini 126).

In "The Captain's Last Love", the protagonist's desire to possess Aimata parallels his appropriation of the island's resources, transforming both the 'arcadian' land and the young woman into objects of consumption within an imperial ideological frame. Just as sandalwood is commodified for profit, Aimata's innocence is reified into a token of conquest, her cultural identity subsumed under the captain's fantasy of taking her to England as his wife. The captain's attempt to reshape her identity within the paradigm of the English 'domestic angel' is an act of assimilation that seems to unleash the fury of occult natural forces, as if the spirit of the volcano were a guardian of the island and a defender of Indigenous sovereignty. The destruction of the island and the disappearance of Aimata expose the hollowness of English imperialism, reminding the captain that nature and culture alike resist being reduced to possessions. Indeed, his tragic loss reveals that hubris – in the guise of commercial enterprises or romanticized, exoticized love – inevitably collapses before the untamable forces that safeguard what empire seeks to dominate.

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Created: 2025-03-18 | Last Updated: 2025-12-10