

Gremlins and Demons: The Decline of Britain as Seen in Nevil Shute's Novels

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Nevil Shute, perhaps best known for A Town Like Alice, which was made into a popular PBS miniseries, and the apocalyptic On the Beach, a nuclear holocaust story made into a film starring Gregory Peck and Eva Gardner, was an aeronautical engineer who wrote novels that are a reflection of his engineering mind. He points out problems, investigates their causes, and proposes solutions. Shute saw large abstract forces in the world that were unsound, which may be seen as demons. These demons gave birth to concrete problems that one can call gremlins, a term that Shute as an engineer, aviator, and military officer knew well. In fact, in one of his novels, No Highway, he actually used the word:

Some unknown gremlin in it [the aircraft] had leaped out upon Bill Ward suddenly, so suddenly that he had been unable to send word upon the radio, and it [the gremlin] had killed him, and thirty other people with him. [Samuelson's] instinct, bred of nearly twenty thousand hours in the air, told him that one day that thing would happen again. (75)

Thus, a gremlin has caused a disaster, the crash of an airliner. However, in Shute's economy, there is a demon that gave birth to the gremlin. In this particular case, the demon was an engineering error that the bureaucratic mindset of the British government agency in charge of civil aviation was unwilling or unable to address. Shute believed that if a demon is not dealt with, it will spawn more and more gremlins. Therefore, as he openly declared that his books were meant to be "useful" (No, "Author's Note" 346), he meant that he was informing the reader of problems and proposing the solutions to those problems. The solutions were based not necessarily on what is in accord with law, but through what George Orwell called "common decency," a belief that there are moral values that transcend what may be legal or illegal. A good example of belief in morality as opposed to mere law to act as the basis of problem solving is found in Shute's Ruined City. In that novel, the protagonist, Henry Warren, takes it upon himself to perform a highly moral act: the revival of a city that has been thrown into ruin by the collapse of its shipyard. To accomplish the task, Warren has to act illegally. In fact, he is willing to go to jail to save the town and its workers. Thus, Shute proposed that one should do whatever is necessary in order to do what is good.

Because of the ever-more-rapid decline of the British Empire during his lifetime, Shute had plenty of perceived demons and their gremlin offspring to deal with in his fiction. The Far Country, a novel written in 1952, after Shute left England, is probably the most overt example of Shute's perception of the decline of Britain, the causes and effects of the decline, and the remedies needed to restore Britain to its rightful place and condition. The story is about Jennifer Morton, a young Englishwoman who inherits a small amount of money after WW II. She uses the money to travel to Australia in order to visit a distant relative. The England she leaves is cold, damp, gray, and poor—dismal in every way. Australia, however, is a total contrast. The protagonist is awed by this land that is so far from home yet somehow still a part of home. She basks in the sun and warmth and celebrates having enough food, including all the meat she can eat. She marvels that the people are so well dressed and free from economic deprivation. Jennifer's thoughts on the deprivations come to a head when, upon returning to England, she has to deal with the economic situation:

Controls that she had once accepted as the normal way of life now irritated her; it infuriated her when she neglected to order coal before the given date and so lost two months' ration of the precious stuff. Studying to make meals more interesting for her father, she thought longingly of the claret that Jack Dorman had bought in five-gallon stone jars for seven shillings a gallon, and of unlimited cream; the ration books perplexed her and meat was a continual, bad-tempered joke. (324)

The people in Australia are clean, cheerful, well dressed, and employed. Even average Australians live better lives than does her father, Dr. Morton, who practices medicine in England. Something has gone wrong—the daughter country has become a richer, freer, better place than its mother. Through the protagonist's perceptions, the reader sees the economic, social, and political decline of Britain. The obvious cause of the decline is WW II, a phenomenon that is a fact, a just war of self-defense and struggle against evil that had to occur. However, in Shute's eyes, the real demon is the Labour government's policies and the mindset that put that government into power. Shute indicates that socialist policies and legislation led to various gremlins, including taxes that discouraged ambition, social services that bred dependency, and attitudes that led to a particularly nasty class envy.

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In the book, Shute notes the lethargy of the English people. For example, Dr. Morton is dispirited not only by the loss of his wife, but because of the burdens placed upon him by socialized medicine without any incentives for him to be a really good doctor. Shute's attitude comes through the third-person narrator's description of Jennifer's thoughts:

She came to look with some resentment at the surgery patients with their trivial requirements for free medicine and their endless papers to be signed. The bottom was reached, for her, when a man came for medicine and a certificate exempting him from work because he couldn't get up in the morning. (323)

An example of class envy in the book is when several working-class Englishmen are discussing the problem of emigration from England—what was once referred to as the “brain drain.” The characters reason that Britain had a lot of money tied up in educating each citizen. This education was an investment by the country in the next generation. The government needed to get a return on its investment; therefore, educated people should not be allowed to leave Britain and let America, Canada, Australia, or other countries reap the profit of what Britain had sowed. One of the men goes on to speak about the new society that Britain was in the process of forging:

“I'll tell you. Here in England we've got the most advanced form of government of any country in the world. It's experimental, and I know there've been mistakes But what this country has tried to do, and what it's doing, is to plan a new form of government and put it into practice, a new form of democracy where everyone will get a square deal But it can't be worked out if people are allowed to run away to other countries. It's their job to stay here and get this one right.” (94)

Therefore, The Far Country is not only a good story, but a vehicle through which Shute vents his frustration with the way things were going in the U. K.

Shute's views were shaped by his time, place, and social class as well as his individual personality and circumstances. One way to introduce Shute himself is to compare him to an author who represented the high water mark of the British Empire, Rudyard Kipling. Kipling emphasized the virtue of manly earnestness as the secret to Britain's greatness and continued progress as the greatest power in the world. In 1907 Kipling won the Nobel Prize in Literature in "consideration of the power of observation, originality of imagination, virility [emphasis added] of ideas and remarkable talent for narration which characterized his writings." In his essay on Kipling, which is in The Liberal Imagination, Lionel Trilling interprets this "virility of ideas" as Kipling's having "mixed ...[the national virtues] up with a swagger and swank, with bullying, ruthlessness, and self-righteousness, and he set them up as necessarily antagonistic to intellect" (122).

The masculine references are important. In Bringing up Boys, psychologist James Dobson cites authorities who point out that males gravitate toward a certain kind of book--lots of action, specific details, and a shared code (187). Perhaps this kind of writing is best illustrated by Kipling's stories, which are set in exotic places, where the characters and the reader have adventures that require special knowledge and even vocabulary for the characters and through them the vicarious reader to succeed. Trilling called it a "sense of arcanum" (115). Nevil Shute wrote those kinds of stories, but with several important differences that go beyond the differences between the writers' levels of personal talent. These differences were dictated by the two eras in which the men lived.

Kipling was born into the Empire as it was reaching its zenith. Shute, on the other hand, witnessed the zenith when he was a boy, then the decline after WWI, and finally the collapse after WWII. Both men loved Great Britain, but each was influenced by circumstances to deal with the conditions of the nation in different ways.

One can suppose that a popular fiction writer such as Shute would be beneath Trilling's notice, but if one sees Shute's fiction as promoting conservative ideals, Trilling's assessment of Kipling seems on target:

Kipling was one of liberalism's major intellectual misfortunes. John Stuart Mill, when he urged all liberals to study the conservative Coleridge, said that we should pray to have enemies who make us worthy of ourselves. Kipling was an enemy who had the opposite effect. He tempted liberals to be content with easy victories of right feeling and moral self-congratulation. (121)

Admittedly, Shute, even less than Kipling, did not aspire to great art and philosophy. Nevertheless, both authors were bound to essentially conservative, perhaps simplistic visions of the sort Trilling alludes to.

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There is a considerable basis of comparison between Kipling and Shute. The similarities make it possible to show how each author is an embodiment of the British zeitgeist of his time. Both men were born into fairly privileged lives in the Empire, Kipling in the Raj and Shute in the highest ranks of the British civil service—his father was for a time head of the postal service in Ireland. Both used their unique experiences in their writing and celebrated ordinary people rising to extraordinary tasks. Both loved poetry, and both had strong women in their backgrounds. Both had a measure of respect for people who were not English. In fact, both even were published by the same firm. In addition, one may argue, that Kipling's famous poem "Recessional," written for the sixtieth anniversary of Queen Victoria's reign, predicted the kind of British Empire that Shute and his generation would inherit. One portion of the poem reads,

Far-called, our navies melt away;
On dune and headland sinks the fire;
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
Is one with Nineveh and Tyre. (806)

The men's lives overlapped for thirty-seven years, but Kipling was the Empire's glorious past while Shute was England's sober future.

Shute would not have cared what a scholar like Trilling thought about literature because even more than Kipling, Shute was a popular writer. Evidence for Shute's disregard for high-brow ideas is in his "Notes on A Town Like Alice" concerning his criteria for a good novel:

I think that the contents of a book are far more important than the style. An author should write as well as he is able to, because one of his jobs is to make his book easy to read, but no book will be successful, however good the writing, if the contents are trivial and not worth reading. For this reason it has always seemed to me to be important to go to great lengths to find new material, to search for new facts and for new ideas to present to the reader in the fiction form. An author should know something of the world outside the bedroom if his book is to be useful.

Thus, content must be important, easy to understand, and above all else useful. Shute's formula for fiction could be derived from a basic engineering textbook. Any "art" should be transparent; a useful message is what counts.

As was noted earlier in the case of The Far Country, the economic demon is probably the easiest to pick out in Shute's pantheon of problems. Shute's views of economics were shaped by several autobiographical factors.

The **first** is his being born into an upper-middle class family at the height of Victorian affluence. His father's position insured the Shutes a very high standard of living. However, after the Irish troubles and the First World War, when his father retired, the family was in much lower circumstances.

Second was Shute's involvement with dirigible production in the early 1930s. The British government established a contest between two engineering teams to produce an airship that would serve as the model for a fleet that would become a worldwide airline, connecting the parts of the Empire and Commonwealth. One team, charged with producing the R100, was made of private engineers and workers, including Shute. The other, the R101, was staffed by government employees. Due to its connections, the government project always had better facilities and funding, not to mention publicity. However, the private airship proved to be the much superior design, completing its transatlantic roundtrip test flight with no major problems. The government ship, which was to do one better by flying to India and back, made it as far as France before it crashed, killing all but six of its passengers—more deaths than in the Hindenburg disaster. The British government not only ended the entire airship project but scrapped the R100, receiving about 500 pounds for a craft that was worth many times that amount—underlining Shute's perception of bureaucratic ineptitude. Shute hints that the project was abandoned not because it was incapable of success but because the bureaucrats' creation failed while that of private enterprise succeeded.

Third was Shute's starting his own aircraft company, Airspeed, Ltd. He and his colleagues were able to design and build a number of models, including one that was to become the official royal airplane. Shute found that his most difficult task was not in the engineering but in raising venture capital for the company. He soon discovered that the banks did not really offer venture capital. They were very conservative in their investments, preferring a sure low rate of return to the risky chance to earn a high yield. On the other hand, wealthy individuals were the best source of capital. These individuals would often catch the vision of a new company growing and making a profit. In addition, they were able to see the advantages a new company would hold for local area's businesses and workers. Thus, Shute came to distrust governmental and institutional monetary policies. In addition, he saw that as rising taxation caused a

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decline in the ability of wealthy individuals to invest, businesses suffered.

A **fourth** factor was Shute's increasing personal wealth. As his literary works became more and more popular, his royalties skyrocketed. He already had a financial base supplied by his sale of Airspeed to de Havilland Aircraft, and during the Second World War he had an officer's salary, so he was having to pay an ever increasing percentage of his income in taxes. One motive for Shute's move to Australia was to escape what he saw as unfair taxation. Parallel to his rising tax burden in England was the general decline in the standard of living. The country was deeply in debt because of the war, and the Empire was beginning to fall apart. The unofficial motto of the United Kingdom was "export or die." British goods were not available for British citizens; everything possible was sold overseas for hard cash. Thus, Jennifer in The Far Country could be amazed by how kippered herring from the UK was available "all over Australia" when they were "very scarce" back in England (139). There were strict restrictions on how much money a British citizen could take abroad, a factor in the plot of Trustee from the Toolroom, Shute's last novel. In fact, Britain was still facing rationing when almost all other countries, including the defeated powers, were no longer rationing goods.

Another gremlin birthed by the poor economic policy demon is lack of incentive. The Trustee from the Toolroom is perhaps the best example of how England was not kind to her dedicated workers. Keith Stewart, the protagonist, is a self-taught engineer who writes articles for a hobbyist magazine about model machines. He earns a pathetically low salary, which forces his wife to work at a menial job and causes the couple to have a low standard of living. When an American fan of Stewart's articles hears about his financial straits, the fan notes that an engineer like Stewart could earn several times more in America. However, recognizing that Stewart will stay in England, the American businessman arranges for a sizable commission check to be sent to the underpaid engineer. Thus, the Britain relies on the charity of foreigners rather than the just rewards from the economy of his own country.

Racism is another demon that breeds all sorts of gremlins, including failure to recognize and use talents of nonwhites, failure to embrace good ideas of nonwhite people, and injustice that causes anti-British and Western attitudes.

David Anderson of In the Wet is a character who embodies all that is good about the native Aussies and the English. He is highly intelligent, athletic, ambitious, handsome, and loyal. He has just about every natural gift and grace one could imagine. Yet, he is ever conscious that he is 25% black and insists on being called a racial epithet as a nickname. Anderson has had to live in a pure-white world, just one step away from failure in everything he does. As the story unfolds, Anderson becomes a kind of savior of the Empire as he not only pilots the Queen and other important figures around the commonwealth, but saves the royal party from a bomb he detects through his Aboriginal instincts. To have rejected the pilot because of his racial background would have been to risk the existence of Britain itself.

Beyond the Black Stump shows that Britain and Australia were not the only nations suffering from the problem of racism. Stantan Laird, an American oil geologist working temporarily in the Outback, falls in love with Molly Regan, a young Australian woman who has been born and reared on a station located "beyond the black stump," Australian slang for in the middle of nowhere. She is the child of unmarried whites, but a number of her half brothers and sisters are mixed Aboriginals and whites. The American takes his Australian fiancée back to his home in the Pacific Northwest to meet his family. However, his parents are unprepared to accept the fact that a number of Molly's relatives are black and mixed race. Her illegitimacy is not a big issue, nor are her foreign ways; however, the connection with nonwhites makes her an unacceptable daughter in law. The gremlin of American racism deprives a young man of his love.

Round the Bend and In the Wet spend a lot of time dealing with racism. Connie Shak Lin, the prophet in Round the Bend, is the child of Chinese and Russian parents, but he is still a British citizen. Because of his innate gifts and ancestry, he is a person able to bridge cultural, racial, and religious gulfs.

Shak Lin is a Buddhist whose theology both embraces and transcends all religions. At one point in the novel he is living in Bahrain, where he works for the owner of a small charter air transport service. Connie's basic principle is that a technician who works well obeys and glorifies God. The reasoning is that God is the ultimate inspector of all labor and every craft. By working as though God were looking over his or her shoulder, the mechanic lives in holiness. At first, Connie leads the Muslims who work in the hanger in prayer, but more and more local Muslims begin coming to the workers' prayer time. However, racism and xenophobia arise through a British military officer with a bureaucratic mindset. The officer risks all the progress toward harmony between the locals and the British that Shak Lin has brought by trying to kick him and his followers off the airfield.

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To the narrow minded among the English, Shak Lin is simply a WOG, a racial epithet that is in both English and Australian slang signifying sarcastically "Worthy Oriental Gentleman." Yet, Shak Lin, an indeed worthy Oriental gentleman is a person who can make peace and prosperity possible throughout the world.

There are too many demons and their gremlins to explore in this short time; however, there is an ultimate demon. It threatens not just Britain, but the entire world—nuclear war as described in what is probably Shute's most famous work, On the Beach. In this novel, the nations of the northern hemisphere have destroyed one another in a nuclear war. However, the fallout is slowly making its way south, poisoning all life as it proceeds. The southern Australians are among the last to go. There is no escape; there is no hope. The demon of atomic warfare does not need to spawn gremlins; the demon itself will kill everything. Therefore, Shute is warning the world to come to its senses and avoid nuclear proliferation and confrontation.

To conclude, Shute's world view was very straightforward. He looked at life and society as an engineer would, observing problems, investigating their sources, and proposing solutions. His main concern was the decline of Britain from the Victorian zenith of his parents' time to the bleak prospects of the post-WW II era. His political and economic conservatism is at the core of his perceptions.

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