

Laura Vorachek, 'Mesmerists and Other Meddlers: Social Darwinism, Degeneration, and Eugenics in *Trilby*.' *Victorian Literature and Culture* 37 (2009): 197-215

Scholarly criticism of George Du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894) has tended to focus on the novel's depiction of women, Jews, aestheticism, and mesmerism. Although some critics have explored the ideas of racial degeneration that inform Du Maurier's anti-Semitic characterisation of Svengali – including Daniel Pick's detailed analysis in *Svengali's Web: The Alien Enchanter in Modern Culture* (2000) – the importance of other Darwinian-inspired social theories in the novel has often been overlooked. Shifting the primary focus of investigation to Du Maurier's representation of scientific and pseudoscientific ideas in *Trilby*, Laura Vorachek's article takes a wider view of the novel to suggest that it sits at the very heart of the Darwinian and eugenicist debates of the late Victorian period.

Du Maurier's fascination with Darwin's work had a profound effect on his writing; indeed, as Vorachek points out in her opening passage, Du Maurier spends seventeen pages of *Trilby* ruminating about *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Rather than adhering to the pessimistic outlook of many proponents of degeneration and eugenics in the 1890s, Du Maurier identified with Darwin's more optimistic view that evolution was a progressive movement toward perfection. However, he does not simply reproduce evolutionary theories in *Trilby*; instead, he manipulates them in order to reveal their inherent tensions and conflicts. Indeed, one of Vorachek's central points is that *Trilby* warns its readers that evolutionary progress could be hindered by the suppression of individualism in favour of social conformity. Vorachek presents a convincing case that *Trilby*'s ability to adapt to her environment can be read in positive evolutionary terms and that her moral degeneracy is not due to biological factors or heredity, but rather to the social constraints generated by middle-class codes of conduct. Through the careful accumulation of such evidence from the text, Vorachek argues persuasively that *Trilby* advances the notion that evolutionary progress can be achieved only when sexual selection is determined by individual choice rather than by social strictures.

Vorachek's article is both a significant contribution to the study of the scientific resonances in late Victorian fiction and a highly suggestive analysis of how popular culture is shaped by exchanges between science and literature. Her title 'Mesmerists and Other Meddlers' refers to the connections between mesmerism and meddling that she traces throughout *Trilby* and that forms the principle source of tension in the narrative between individual freedom and collective dogma. In particular, the social regulation of marriage (or sexual selection) is shown to have destructive results for many of the major characters in the novel. Vorachek demonstrates that Du Maurier's portrayal of meddling in *Trilby* – whether it is caused by the intrusive Mrs. Bagot who promotes middle-class values above her son's happiness, or by the aristocratic Zouzou who marries for social status rather than for love – is consistently pessimistic. Arguing that Du Maurier's novel is highly critical of those who sacrifice individual liberty for collectivist principles, she claims that Svengali's mesmeric ability "stands in for and amplifies other means by which an individual forfeits his or her will to a collective force, be it middle-class mores or eugenic programs" (205). Read in this way, those who meddle in the lives of

individuals in order to uphold prescriptive middle-class values – meddling mothers, eugenicists, and social regulators alike – are all cast as manipulators resembling the malevolent Svengali. In the compelling final section of her essay, Vorachek draws together these seemingly disparate ideas – mesmerism, meddling, eugenics, and evolution – in intriguing and highly convincing ways.

By contextualising *Trilby* within these debates about mesmerism, degeneration, and eugenics, Vorachek illuminates the reciprocal relationship between the text and the scientific and pseudoscientific theories of the late nineteenth century. Her article not only traces the influences of social Darwinism, degeneration, and eugenics in the novel, but it also offers a persuasive argument that Du Maurier was actively engaged in questioning many of the precepts of these theories. Clearly and cogently bringing such wide-ranging concepts into sharp focus, ‘Mesmerists and Other Meddlers’ marks an important contribution to studies in late Victorian science and popular culture.

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