Deciphering Race

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Deciphering Race engages with the complex and contested world of Victorian racial discourse. In the five central texts under consideration in this study—Harriet Martineau's The Hour and the Man, Robert Knox's The Races of Men, Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins's “The Perils of Certain English Prisoners,” the transcript of the inquiry into the Governor Eyre Controversy, and James Grant's First Love and Last Love—a white English author or character turns to the aesthetic in order to assuage a sense of anxiety produced by a confrontation with racial otherness. White characters or narrators confront the limitations of preconceived ideologies or the interlacing of oppressions, and subsequently falter.

In this manner these narratives confront the complexity, indeterminacy, and irrationality of both racial difference and the systems put in place to understand that difference. Deciphering Race unpacks this narrative turn to the aesthetic in writings by white English individuals and thus reveals the instability at the heart of cultural understanding of race and racial tropes at mid-century.

This series of readings will help to see how figurative structures, while providing a bridge between different cultures and epistemologies, also reinforce a distance that keeps groups separate. Only by disentangling these structures, by addressing and unpacking our assumptions and narratives about those different from ourselves, and by understanding our deep cultural anxiety and investment in these ways of talking about one another, can we begin to create the conditions for productive, local understanding between different cultures, races, and communities.

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