A discussion of the ways in which masculinity was perceived and constructed in the novel of empire might well begin with a broader debate among recent historians. Those like Bernard Porter, who hold that the mainstream Victorian novel was ‘relatively empire free’, will consider the topic a defined one, pertinent to the work of writers like Haggard, Kipling and Conrad, but not much more widely. By contrast, to those who have argued that the imperial experience of the nineteenth century had so profound an impact that even the supposedly ‘domestic’ novel necessarily carried traces of its ‘cultural imprint’, such a limitation will seem tendentious. It is easy enough to find instances where both imperial and domestic concerns are in play. Charlotte Brontë’s St John Rivers perfectly embodies an early Victorian interpretation of manhood ‘as self-discipline, as the ability to control male energy’, but the value ascribed to his capacity for repression depends on whether it appears in the courtship plot or the imperial field: the hardness that disqualifies him as a suitor for Jane Eyre is also the foundation of his success as a missionary in India. But while Daniel Bivona, Edward Said and others have argued against a simple opposition of the domestic and the imperial novel, it was a division many late Victorian writers were eager to make. To Robert Louis Stevenson, Andrew Lang and Conan Doyle, there was a clear line to be drawn between the novels of, say, George Eliot or Henry James, addressed to adult readers of either sex, and the novel of overseas adventure, written, in Rider Haggard’s words, to entertain ‘big and little boys’, with ‘not a petticoat in the whole history’. Rather than take as its subject the relations of men and women in a specific
time, class and place, Victorian adventure fiction belongs to what
Joseph Bristow describes as a movement among conservative writers
‘to mould the idea of the finest novel to a wholly depoliticized and
universalized set of masculine terms’. Their achievement, with the
primary credit given to Stevenson, was what Doyle called ‘the mod-
ern masculine novel’, which set out to deal:

almost exclusively with the rougher, more stirring side of life, with
the objective rather than the subjective ... [in] a reaction against
the abuse of love in fiction.7

This more ‘objective’ fiction was a self-conscious challenge to what
many late Victorian men of letters regarded as the feminization of
literature. Women dominated the lists of best-selling authors – Sarah
Grand wrote exultingly that ‘For one reader Robert Louis Stevenson
has, Mrs Humphry Ward has a thousand’8 – and were increasingly
active as reviewers and journalists; they also made up the larger por-
tion of the reading public, a fact used to justify the moral timidity of
magazine editors and the circulating libraries. Literature, protested
George Moore, had been put out to nurse.9 Those male novelists
who wished to explore the relations of the sexes – Meredith, Moore,
Gissing, Hardy – insisted that, at the least, life should be honestly
portrayed as ‘a physiological fact’, regardless of what was held due to
‘budding womanhood’.10 Others, more simply, turned to a fictional
world in which women had no part.

The new critical idiom soon became familiar. Lang, for example,
applauded Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885) as an addition to
‘the list of good, manly, and stirring fiction of pure adventure’.11
Stevenson’s own ‘A Gossip on Romance’ expands on the distinction
between the stirring and manly on the one hand, and the subjective
and analytic on the other:

One and all, ... we read story-books in childhood; not for elo-
quence or character or thought, but for some quality of the brute
incident ... There is a vast deal in life and letters both which is
not immoral, but simply a-moral; which either does not regard
the human will at all, or deals with it in obvious and healthy rela-
tions; where the interest turns, not upon what a man shall choose
to do, but on how he manages to do it; not on the passionate