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In 1977, professor of African literature Chinua Achebe delivered a seminal polemic to the University of Massachusetts campus on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* in which he made the frequently quoted assertion that "Conrad was a bloody racist" (124). Achebe's remarks were made at a time when literary representation of the colonial other was burgeoning as a field of scholarship and incited a wave of criticism almost as prolific as that incited by Conrad himself. It marked such a significant turning point in the study of Conrad's works that today no one attempting such a study can overlook it. Prior to Achebe's remarks, *Heart of Darkness* was almost unanimously championed as a great work of anti-imperialism; afterwards, though many still defended this position, it became just that—a position—and no longer a premise. Some agreed; some disagreed—most did so vehemently. I find myself somewhere on middle ground. Like a true deconstructionist, I do not believe that anyone is free from ambiguity—even geniuses like Conrad. *Heart of Darkness* is a disunified manifestation of the ideologies of a specific history that betrays gaps and ruptures. While Conrad is markedly self-conscious and critical of some aspects of imperialism, as a product of the ideologies that justify it he cannot help but at least partially reiterate some of them—especially racist ones, as Achebe has so unforgettably demonstrated.

Tracing the complete ideologies of a specific person or era is, of course, impossible. However, if I am to show that Conrad is self-conscious of British imperial ideology at the beginning of the twentieth century, and that he both reprimands and reinforces it, I must explain, at least in part, what that ideology is. Simply put, Britain believed that it was at the top of a moral, political, and cultural hierarchy. Statements such as this one made in 1848 by Lord H. J. Palmerston,

Britain's Foreign Secretary and future Prime Minister, abound in European political and social documents of the time: "I may say without any vainglorious boast, or without great offence to anyone, that we stand at the head of moral, social and political civilization. Our task is to lead the way and direct the march of other nations" (qtd. in Hyam 89).

Ronald Hyam explores the reasons behind this feeling in his book *Britain's Imperial Century, 1815–1914: A Study of Empire and Expansion.* He says that English thought at this time is a product of the Enlightenment. Thinkers like Descartes scorned superstition and heralded reason in its place. Reason led to progress and progress led to such things as the Industrial Revolution—a prime example of the type of technological advance that such empirical thought and study could produce (74–90). Linda Dryden expands on these reasons in her book *Joseph Conrad and the Imperial Romance.* Empire itself, along with Britain's superior naval force, was seen as proof of British superiority. Moreover, the theory of Social Darwinism developed as more "proof": "The English were a 'fit' race and the fittest survived" (29–31). Overall, the English felt that theirs was a history of improvement and that they had improved to the highest point in the cultural hierarchy. It was, they felt, their responsibility to help the more inferior nations of the world rise to their heights. This is manifest by such statements as that made by Sir Frederick Lugard, a famous colonial administrator at the turn of the century:

> As Roman imperialism laid the foundation of modern civilization and led the wild barbarians of these islands [Britain] along the path of progress, so in Africa today we are repaying the debt, and bringing to the dark places of the earth—the abode of barbarism and cruelty—the torch of culture and progress. (qtd. in Dryden 29–30)

Conrad is obviously aware of this type of thought and mirrors it in the opening pages of his book:

> "And this also," said Marlow suddenly, "has been one of the dark places of the earth [. . .]. I was thinking of very old times, when the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago—the other day [. . .]. Light came out of this river since—you say Knights? Yes; but it is like a running blaze on a plain, like a flash of lightning in the clouds. We live in the flicker—may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling! But darkness was here yesterday." (5)

Like Lugard, Conrad creates an analogy between the British imperial experience and the Roman imperial experience some centuries before. But while Marlow at first seems grateful for the Romans, like Lugard ("We live in the flicker—may it last as long as the old earth keeps rolling!"), he ultimately attacks Roman and, therefore, British imperialism, as is demonstrated at the conclusion of his analogy:

> What saves us is efficiency—the devotion to efficiency. But these chaps were not much account, really. They were no colonists [. . .] they were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force [. . .]. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or

> slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea—something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. (6–8)

Marlow supposedly differentiates between the Roman and the British experience here, claiming that the Romans were different from the British because their mission was one of mere conquest while the European mission was one of colonizing, a supposedly superior aim. Ironically, however, Conrad goes on in the novel to show us how the European colonial experience is exactly like the Roman's brutal conquest, exactly like taking away land from those with "a different complexion or slightly flatter noses" by "brute force" (8). Moreover, he mocks the supposed "efficiency" that saves the Europeans by exposing all of the inefficiency of the trading posts: the brick-maker who never makes any bricks, the African "workers" blowing a hole in a rock for no purpose, the impossibility of getting the supplies that he needs to repair his damaged steamer.

Interestingly, however, Conrad says that the conquest/colonizing process is redeemed by an idea that lies at the back of it—the idea of progress and civilization. Some critics have used this passage to argue that Conrad believes that Empire, while devastating and inhumane, is redeemed by the noble cause of progress (see Blake); however, such critics miss the ironic tone at the end of the passage when Conrad compares the idea to an idol that can be bowed down before, and to which one can offer a sacrifice, thus casting a negative light onto it and invalidating it. And later, while talking with the aunt who secured him the position in the Congo, he exposes the true motivations of British "progress" as purely economic. She is "triumphant" because she believes that Marlow is to be "something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle" (19). In response Marlow says,

> There had been a lot of such rot let loose in print and talk just about that time, and the excellent woman, living right in the rush of all that humbug, got carried off her feet. She talked about "weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways," till, upon my word, she made me quite uncomfortable. I ventured to hint that the company was run for profit. (19)

Conrad mocks the redeeming idea; for him it does not exist—the real motivation is purely economic.

Besides the women in the book (all of whom seem to buy into this moral justification for Empire), there is also one man who believes in the civilizing process. That is Kurtz. Kurtz is a genius and a symbol of progress—a painter, a musician, a brilliant businessman. Conrad says, "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz" (91), by which we learn that Kurtz is a representative of European ideology and, therefore, the redeeming idea. Unlike most of the other men, who are clearly there for profit, Kurtz comes out believing in the redeeming idea. He is appointed by the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs to generate a report for England to use. Marlow says that the document

Kurtz writes for the Society is moving. It is so moving, in fact, that even this skeptic of progress says, "It made me tingle with enthusiasm" (92). But in the end Kurtz relinquishes his idea and becomes the most brutal of all the colonizers, placing native heads on stakes outside his trading post, participating in "unspeakable rites," and eventually scribbling "Exterminate all the brutes!" (92) at the end of his noble document on civilization. Kurtz is unable to keep up the pretences of civilization and, in the end, becomes even more brutish than the other traders, who are unabashedly there for economic gain only, once again crushing the idea that a civilizing idea to redeem colonization exists, or can be sustained.

Conrad attacks imperialism by exposing its brutality and its "motives" through his speech, but he does so in other, subtler ways as well. For instance, as Benita Parry points out, Conrad attacks imperialism by inverting the mythical black/white color hierarchy used to justify colonialism. Typically, Western mythology posits white as goodness, truth, and purity, and associates blackness with the wicked, mendacious, and defiled. However, the black and white imagery abundant in *Heart of Darkness* is not so clear-cut. "Instead of denoting purity, virtue, clarity and veracity, white and light [. . .] come to signify corruption, evil, confusion and lies" (20). Examples include Kurtz's head like a ball of ivory; Brussels, the white city which looks like a whited sepulcher; the blinding white fog on the river; and the ivory, which is worshipped as an idol by rapacious, brutish Europeans (Parry 21–22).

And if the text alone does not convince us of Conrad's mistrust for what he ironically refers to as the "dustbin of progress" (93), his writing about his work does. In a letter to his publishers Conrad says,

> You will soon receive a story for the *Cosmo* [. . .]. It is a story of the Congo [. . .]. All the bitterness of those days, all my puzzled wonder as to the meaning of all I saw—all my indignation at masquerading philanthropy—have been with me again, while I wrote. (Qtd. in Kimbrough 199)

Unfortunately, however, this "indignation at masquerading philanthropy," begins to fall apart in his description of the colonial other: the African. No doubt Conrad scorns British Empire for its ostensible morality and is disturbed by its brutal treatment of the African—the slavery, the killing, the domination—but while he finds fault with the colonizing process, he ultimately believes one of the major premises that sustains colonial activity: that the British are racially superior to the Africans. Conrad's anti-imperialist statements serve as a type of rhetorical inoculation, immunizing his readers against his verbal mistreatment of Africans. In his book *Mythologies,* Roland Barthes labels just such an "inoculation" as one of the rhetorical devices used by the typical bourgeois man incapable of understanding the other. According to Barthes, the inoculation consists of "admitting the accidental evil of a class-bound institution the better to conceal its principal evil. One immunizes the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil" (120).

Conrad also resorts to the rhetorical device of exoticism, which Barthes expands on in the same chapter of *Mythologies*. Barthes says that the petit-bourgeois "is a man unable to imagine the other." On coming "face to face" with him he takes one of two recourses: either he reduces the otherness to sameness, refusing or incapable of admitting to the existence of otherness, or, on finding the other so absolutely "other" that he is irreducible, he denies all relation and resorts to exoticism. The other then becomes "a pure object, a spectacle, a clown" (122–23). Conrad falls under the second category. He creates a picture of Africa and of the African that is wild and exotic or, to use Conrad's own terms, "inscrutable" and "impenetrable" (129). Achebe identifies various aspects of this exoticism, explaining that in the novel Conrad often describes characters as "just limbs or rolling eyes," uses Africa as a "backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor," and denies the African any kind of intelligible speech, robbing them of the chance to share their part of the story (122–24). For example,

> I saw a face amongst the leaves on the level with my own, looking at me very fierce and steady; and then suddenly, as though a veil had been removed from my eyes, I made out, deep in the tangled gloom, naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eyes—the bush was swarming with human limbs in movement, glistening, of bronze colour.

Or this example later on:

> But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, or peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage [. . .]. The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell? We were [. . .] secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse.

By creating these curiously wild images of the African, Conrad makes the African an object and a clown, relegating him to the outer regions of his totality, beyond comprehension and almost beyond concern.

Moreover, as Achebe points out, Conrad paints a picture of the Africans at a rudimentary stage of development, ultimately savage and bestial (120). For example, traveling down the river to the heart of Africa, "to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings" (60), Marlow is surprised that the Africans (he has previously informed his readers that they are cannibals) do not eat him and the other Europeans aboard. Musing over the idea he says that restraint cannot possibly be what is holding them back:

> And these chaps too had no earthly reason for any kind of scruple. Restraint! I would just as soon have expected restraint from a hyena prowling amongst the corpses of a battlefield. But there was the fact [of their not eating us] facing me [. . .] a mystery. (76)

Conrad does not believe that "these chaps" can be exercising restraint because he does not believe that they have any real sense of right or wrong to restrain them. They do not have "much capacity to weigh the consequences" (75). Thus, their "restraint" that cannot possibly be restraint eludes his comprehension.

This very restraint, which marks the distinction between the civilized and the uncivilized, is exactly what Kurtz loses among the "savages." When Conrad finds Kurtz he says, "[Kurtz] lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts" (107). Moreover, "The wilderness [. . .] got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own" (99), until he became a "soul satiated with primitive emotions" (128). Kurtz, representative of all redeeming European thought and ideology, ultimately falls prey to a mysterious savagery, an "impenetrable" darkness, and serves as a warning to other Europeans to steer clear of the same fate. Thus, the Africans become not only mysterious, they become dangerous—capable of pulling you down to their level, as it were.

This representation is not only unfair, it is deadly—deadly because it helps reinforce and perpetuate stereotypes about the African that will spill over even into contemporary literature and media. As Parry points out in her footnotes, the clichés that Conrad uses to describe the natives, namely

> the converging crowds carrying spears, bows and shields, casting wild glances, making savage movements and uttering weird cries, the dark shapes in fantastic headdresses and spotted skins, standing warlike and still in statuesque repose, are amongst the many clichés used by Conrad and later adopted by popular "epic" films set in Africa. (142)

There are two horrors then in the novel. The first is the horror of imperialism—its ruthless domination, inefficiency, waste, and brute force, with the claims of progress, improvement, and civilizing when in reality its propagators are only after land, trade, and profit. But the other horror is the danger of civilized persons being swallowed up by the primordial savagery of the uncivilized and losing themselves to unrestraint. Thus Conrad, who, to the reader conditioned by the same ideological underpinnings, can seem so utterly anti-imperialist, ends up reinforcing some of the basic stereotypes that make imperialism possible. This should not surprise us—which of us is not guilty of decrying something in theory, but falling short in practice? The problem comes when we do not look for these gaps, do not question and analyze, and do remain critical of representation in general. Then we are sure to continue reinforcing negative stereotypes and ideologies and to ultimately end up like Conrad's nefarious character Kurtz who passes his European audience a sweet moral bit about helping the natives, only to add the postscript "Exterminate all the brutes!" (92).

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