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Conrad's Colonial Critique: A Questioning of Civilization

At the turn of the twentieth century, Europe was the ruling force and the center of Western civilization. The word *civilization* is defined as the stage of human social development and organization that is considered most advanced. Changes in philosophical and psychological thought from theorists such as Nietzsche and Freud were rapidly changing the thought of many Europeans, particularly concerning the strict moral codes from the previous era. These changes in thought lead to critical thinking that can be seen in the work of the modernist writers from this time period, one of which is Joseph Conrad. Joseph Conrad's novella "Heart of Darkness" signifies a questioning of Western civilization and reflects a growing recognition of the futility of its value system.

Beginning in the early 1880s, the vast territory of the Congo in Africa was subject to the will of Leopold II. An estimated half of the Congo population was killed directly or indirectly from the exploitation of their land by Europeans. Most of these Europeans were only interested in the profit they could attain from the rubber boom created by the invention of the inflatable tire for both bicycles and automobiles (Hochschild, 1). Joseph Conrad experienced firsthand the violence in the Congo region, and his time there inspired the critical thought that pervaded most modernists of this time. Conrad's novella "Heart of Darkness" reflects his social critique. The company who employed Marlow in the story is a good reflector of Conrad's opinion on authority in relation to colonialism. Clendinnen describes the agents and employees from the company as "ludicrous self-deceivers, dangerous to others, dangerous to themselves, reeling about in a hallucinatory world" (6). The people Marlow comes in contact with display a disturbing lack of regard for human life. The natives of the region are the primary and obvious example. Enemies, criminals, and laborers are some of the terms used by the Company in order to justify the horrific treatment

of the natives. Clendinnen reiterates this by writing, “Africans could be managed, cognitively and politically, by the application of convenient labels . . . any label that might justify cruelties, including stupid and futile ones” (6). When Marlow first arrives at the station, he is surrounded by symbols of futility. “I avoided a vast artificial hole somebody had been digging on the slope, the purpose of which I found it impossible to divine . . . I discovered that a lot of imported drainage-pipes for the settlement had been tumbled in there. There wasn’t one that was not broken” (Conrad, 2417). The Company’s primary concern was the collection of ivory; their greed and corruption distorted their minds to look beyond the suffering of others who they believed to be inferior. The most vivid moment that reflects the disinterest of the Company towards its “helpers” comes when Marlow happens upon the grove by the river. Here Conrad uses objective words in order to describe the slowly dying natives. They are not men but “shapes” and “angles”; Marlow narrates: “Brought from all the recesses of the coast . . . they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest” (2418). The Company did not see men; what the company saw was a means to an end. The natives, after having done their service, were tossed away and left resembling broken machines no one had the time to fix. Just like the broken drainage- pipes the debilitated natives have been regarded as useless.

Even more telling of the company’s moral deterioration is its attitudes towards its own employees. While Marlow is delayed at the first station he comes across two representatives of the Company- the chief accountant and a sick agent who has been laid on a bed and left in the station building. In reaction against the moaning of the invalid the chief accountant states “The groans of this sick person . . . distract my attention. And without that it is extremely difficult to guard against clerical errors in this climate” (2419). The fact that this man finds the possibility of a clerical error more troubling than the loss of human life shows his deteriorated morality. The chief accountant’s disinterest is clearer when he states “with great composure” that the ill man is “not yet” dead (2419). The accountant is far more concerned with his work than with the likely possibility that his colleague could in fact die. Wexler writes that “the suffering of

Africans was all too obvious to him [Conrad], if not to all Europeans, so he focuses on the victimizers, asking a question that recurred throughout the century: how could ‘civilized’ people do such things?’ (105). Conrad is using the Company as an authority figure representing Western civilization. The Company’s lack of regard for the lives of not only the natives but of its employees represents the fallen morality of Western civilization in Conrad’s time. The way that Conrad portrays the employees of the company makes his readers question their true moral intentions.

One of the many interesting characters of the story is Mr. Kurtz who, as an employee of the Company, garners much curiosity. From the beginning, Marlow hears continuously of Kurtz, and Marlow’s interest in the man is meant to focus the reader’s attention. Kurtz is described by the chief accountant as “a very remarkable person” and as “a first-class agent” (2419). Kurtz brings in more ivory than all the other agents put together. Another agent from the Company says that the same people who were responsible for sending Kurtz out to Africa also sent Marlow; he calls them “the gang of virtue” (2424). Hearing such complements about Kurtz leads Marlow to believe that he has “come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort” despite being in such a harsh environment (2429). Kurtz the “prodigy” symbolizes all that the Company, representing civilization, should be. Kurtz describes his vision for the stations to the manager as being “like a beacon on the road towards better things, a centre for trade of course, but also for humanizing, improving, instructing” (2430). Wexler describes Kurtz as “expound[ing] most of the big ideas circulating in Europe at the time” (102). Kurtz’s vision for human advancement represents the traditional idea that civilized people from Western civilization had a moral duty to those they considered primitive and savage.

The Company’s reaction to Kurtz before and after the events at his station are what Conrad uses in order to provoke further questioning from his readers. The manager also calls Kurtz his best agent, but the overheard conversation between the manager and his uncle reveals an underlying dislike for Kurtz: “And the pestiferous absurdity of his talk . . . he bothered me enough when he was here” (2430). The manager does not share in Kurtz’s vision; his only concern is for the ivory Kurtz can bring him: “Save me!—save the

ivory, you mean” (2452). Kurtz’s madness is caused in part by his knowledge of the hypocrisy of the Company he works for. David Galef states that “the image of a perverted ideal . . . the darkness creeping into what was once a just set of values, does admirably reflect what has happened to Kurtz” (Galef, 123). After seeing the results of Kurtz’s madness, with his cult following and the “ornaments” on spikes, the manager calls Kurtz’s methods “unsound” (2453). Conrad has set up the character of Kurtz using his actions and the reactions he inspires in order to highlight the hypocrisy of the Company. The Company can use their greed and corruption to justify the labor and slow death of the natives but call Mr. Kurtz’s methods inhumane and unsound. Again, Conrad is using his narrative to inspire critical thought through the actions of Kurtz and the way the Company reacts to them.

Although Mr. Kurtz is aware of the darkness around him, no other character is as much of a reflection of modernist critical thought as Marlow. As the storyteller, it is Marlow who has control over the tale and through his perspective the readers are led through the narrative. Marlow acts as the witness to the darkness around him. Clendinnen says, “Habitually distancing himself from his Belgian employers, Marlow appears as a sometimes amused, sometimes contemptuous, sometimes outraged observer of their villainies” (5). Upon seeing the man-of-war firing into the continent, Marlow calls the incident a proceeding with “a touch of insanity” (2416). After seeing the cruelty inflicted upon the natives at both Company stations, Marlow becomes disgusted with the Company and their justifications. Marlow comes to realize the hypocrisy of the Company, his employers, and questions their “great cause” filled with “high and just proceedings” (2417). As Marlow gets closer and closer to Kurtz and his station he begins to ask questions, fulfilling his role as a critical thinker. It is around Mr. Kurtz that Marlow’s story centers, and it is through Kurtz that Marlow gains a new perspective. Marlow recognizes that Kurtz sees the truth and that is why Marlow refers to Kurtz as “the nightmare of my choice” (2455). Marlow detests lies; he would rather believe in Mr. Kurtz than in the Company that has deluded itself in ignoring its own moral depravity.

After his traumatic experience in the Congo region, Marlow returns to society, in a sense, enlightened and filled with new perspective. Clendinnen describes Marlow as coming to know “the instability of his own moral being” (9). Marlow has seen things that have not only forced him to question his own self but the thought of civilization in general. Clendinnen goes on to state: “He [Marlow] is no longer detached from human society yet is still nauseated by it, and his strategic irony has been replaced by comprehensive cynicism” (15). The way Marlow has questioned the Company, an authority to him, is very reminiscent of modern thought- to not accept what has been told by authority figures. Marlow has used his own experiences in order to form his own opinions and set of values.

Joseph Conrad’s novella “Heart of Darkness” encompasses modern thinking in the way Conrad uses his characters to question the world around them. The Company’s set of values are called into question by both Kurtz and Marlow. In this way Kurtz and Marlow resemble Nietzsche’s idea of an ‘overman’. Marlow especially has come out of his experience with a new perspective and an altered set of values. “Heart of Darkness” reflects the kind of doubt and skepticism that would go on to be such a big part of the Modern Era. In this way Conrad’s novella indicates the questioning of Western civilization and brings to attention the growing recognition of the futility of its value system.

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