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THE CONCEPT OF TIME AND HISTORY IN CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS*

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Time or extended time, i.e. history, is neither static nor absolute but rather it is a dynamic and changing force that nations go through. There are periods of great achievements in every nation's history of which they are proud. However, these achievements come at a cost, often at the cost of other nations' extended time. Conrad was in a unique position to both personally experience and later witness this dichotomy, first when he lived under the Russian occupation of Poland then when he worked as a seaman and saw firsthand the cruelty of the Europeans in Africa.

Joseph Conrad was born at the time when Poland suffered the fierce repression by Tsarist Russia after an unsuccessful rebellion. His father, a Polish national and patriot, was seen as a threat in the eyes of the Russians and was imprisoned and exiled; his mother joined his father in exile only to die when young Joseph was but seven years old. Joseph left Poland at the young age of 16, arrived in England at the age of 20, and later became one of the most prominent writers of English literature.

At the age of 33, Conrad worked as a sailor in Africa and was greatly influenced by the African scene. He wrote a number of novels and short stories about the sea, and his novel, *Heart of Darkness,* can be considered a semi- autobiographical novel, in which Conrad relates his experiences on the Congo River in Africa. There he witnessed so many instances of corruption, incompetence and hypocrisy that fully convinced him of the discrepancy between "imperialism's rhetoric and the harsh reality of the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience". [1]

The last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed intense international rivalry for colonial possessions by the different European powers. Europeans generally based their claims to rule primitive people on the basis of their own superiority, both technological and moral, and the English were no exception. The then English prime minister and his colonial secretary argued for continued colonial expansion in Africa and the annexation of African lands as the moral duty of the government to pave the way for British trade and capital. They twisted the economic reasons of imperialism into such high moral virtues that these professions of enlightenment, progress and moral superiority, must have sounded to Conrad as 'disingenuous and destructive fine words'[2], for his personal experience, as well as skeptical nature, led him to believe that ideals and high mindedness generally vanish when applied to reality. His sense of paradox and ethical conflict also arose from his unique vantage point gained from being from a conquered country and from having worked in colonized Africa, where he didn't see much if any of the alleged 'progress.'[3]

The setting of most of the novel takes place in the Congo in Africa which was considered a part of the Belgian empire. The king of Belgium had declared in 1889 that the mission of his country was to spread civilization into Africa and to reduce the barbarism of the African people, for he saw Africa as the 'dark' continent in the sense that it was uncivilized, uneducated, without government, and without culture, and that it needed to be enlightened and civilized by the nations of Europe. This kind of ethnic thinking gave moral

justifications to the less noble goals of imperialism, i.e. the seizure of African lands and African people for forced labor.[4]

In his novel *Heart of Darkness* Conrad portrays his insight into the double standard of imperialism gained from the disparity between what he experienced in his own country in Poland under Russian rule and what he later saw in Africa. In the novel, he talks only about the Europeans in Africa, but throughout we feel a subversive undercurrent of protest that can only come from one who has been on the receiving end of oppression.

Conrad uses an unnamed narrator to tell us of the hero's journey on the river Congo. The novel opens on the Nellie, a sailing vessel anchored outside London on the tranquil River Thames. On board this vessel are the Director of Companies, the Lawyer, the Accountant, and Marlow. Marlow tells them a tale, which makes up the entire novel, of his trip to Africa as a seaman.

The unnamed narrator is proud of the accomplishments of the early English explorers such as Sir Francis Drake, whom he calls "the great knights-errant of the sea."[5] He muses idly on the glory of imperialism, accomplished by those explorers who went forth "bearing the sword, and often the torch."[6] Marlow here looks over at London, regarded by Europeans as the height of civilization, and says, "and this also … has been one of the dark places of the earth."[7] This statement serves as a foreshadowing to the evil (darkness) of imperialism carried out in Africa and described in the book by Marlow. The statement also refers to the concept of the interconnectivity of history, how one nation's past is another nation's present, and begins his discussion on the Roman conquest of England. He describes the struggles of the Romans conquerors with the weather, disease, savage inhabitants, and death while conquering the British Isles. He also states that the Roman explorers were "men enough to face the darkness."[8] This reference to the early Romans' hardships and conquest in England is parallel to the hardships of the British in Africa. Marlow compares these ancient explorers to the modern European explorers, whom he regards as lesser men. For Marlow the only thing that "redeems"[9] the robbery of imperialism is that there is a pure idea behind it.

Marlow begins his story by observing how the river has been the means of many of man's greatest achievements, and that it has been a means of bringing great wealth and glory to those who have sailed on it. He compares between England and Africa saying that in the past England was also a dark place meaning that it was filled with death, destruction, ignorance and violence. Conrad is here implying that there is no basis for the European supremacy over the Africans because they were also savages in the past. Marlow remembers how in ancient times the English were conquered by the Romans for they were seen as a barbaric nation. However Marlow expresses admiration for the Romans because they were honest in declaring the reasons for their conquest, which is material again. Marlow talks of how the Romans came to England in order to conquer its people and steal its wealth. In theory, colonization is morally unacceptable; however Marlow expresses admiration for the Romans for declaring their intentions without sham or deception, in contrast to the European hypocrisy and double standard who declared that their intention for conquering Africa is to bring civilization to this savage continent whereas in fact their aim is merely for material gain. The European character needs to feel morally superior to the other nations.

Marlow recognizes the connection between the sword and the torch, a show of force to subdue those whose land and resources are desired and a show of religion for more idealistic goals. The nations of Europe are all civilized nations, which operate under a rule of law, so in order to justify taking other people's land they needed moral arguments that say they are actually enlightening the people. This way of thinking resulted from the evolutionary theories of the 19th century and led to the notion of the "white man's burden,"[10] which means that it is up to Europeans to civilize the rest of the world by bringing other people up to the

enlightened level of civilization that the Europeans have attained and to wean the heathens from their savage ways.

Marlow bases his perceptions of the Africans on a kind of thinking that was current during the time that Conrad wrote the novel, what today is called scientific racism. Scientists of the nineteenth century theorized that various human populations were at different places on an evolutionary scale that ran on a scale from the savage to the civilized. They placed Europeans on the highest level yet achieved by humanity, the fully civilized. They placed the native people whom the explorers encountered much farther back on the evolutionary scale, as if they were not fully evolved human beings, and called them savages. Darwin's evolutionary ideas during the late nineteenth century as well as Hendrik Verwoerd's ideas concerning white supremacy stated that "the white man must rule because he is elevated by many steps above the black man."[11] This theory was an evolutionary one, meaning that humanity developed from 'barbarism' to 'civilization' and that progress was both inevitable and universal. It compared the progress of civilization to the development of men from children into adults, stating that humans develop from lower childlike stages characterized by impulsiveness, concrete thinking, and a belief in magic to higher stages characterized by adult like qualities such as reflectiveness, abstract thinking, and a receptiveness to 'true' religion. That the native people of Africa were at a less evolved stage of human development was widely accepted and that it was the duty of a more developed people, i.e. the Europeans, to help them was generally agreed upon and served as convenient arguments for expansion, thereby showing continued expansion and control of Africans as not only moral and practical but also a natural part of human evolution.[12] This ideology supposedly justified the material goal of taking the land and labor of non-European countries.

However, this theory had a flaw, for though Europeans had reached the height of civilization, far ahead of their savage past, yet they still retained a memory of savagery in them. Hence, the reader sees that Marlow, though considering himself above the Africans, yet often fearfully wondering about his own affinity to the Africans whom he has been taught to believe are savages. Marlow saw the native Africans as fellow humans with whom he has common characteristics and a common human nature, though they had a different social order acquired from their different environmental conditioning. He sees them as people who are more instinctive and pure unlike the scheming developed Europeans and questions whether the basis for grading these races is correct. For it seems to him that to be uncivilized and good is better than to be civilized and immoral. In 'dark' Africa, with no policemen and no laws to prohibit certain behaviors, the natives act out of their sense of right vs. wrong and faithfulness to human goodness. Ironically, the white men, with their police and their laws to control their behavior, act in inhumane and brutal ways, forsaking the sense of right vs. wrong or human goodness. [13]

This idea is further emphasized in the novel when Marlow arrives at the central station in a state of exhaustion, resembling that of the conditions of the Africans, and says that he felt himself becoming savage, which clearly shows that their savage behavior is not the result of their barbarity but rather as a natural result of fatigue and hunger, and that anyone in the same condition will feel the same way. Marlow is also terrified and fascinated by the Africans he sees along the shore. He struggles with "the suspicion that they were not inhuman,"[14] that he has some "remote kinship"[15] with them. He feels a strange bond to his helmsman, an African, more so than he does to the Europeans on board. The Europeans, whom Marlow refers to as pilgrims, reveal their true inhumanity as they fire randomly into the bush, hoping to kill as many natives as possible.

The Manager, in particular, represents the inhumane European as he starves the Africans. Marlow considers the cannibals on board and wonders why, since they are paid by the Manager only in thin pieces of brass wire and are not fed, they do not attack and eat the Europeans. Perhaps the white men are not even appealing to starving natives, or perhaps they simply have more self-control than the white men display.

The end of all of Marlow's illusions comes when he meets Kurtz only to discover that, contrary to Marlow's beliefs, Kurtz does not turn out to be the great white hope. Instead, he is totally ruthless. Kurtz, just

like the other Europeans that work for the company, has used the ideas of white supremacy and the technology of progress to subdue the Africans and to take their natural resources without payment. The ending of the novel is the opposite of hopeful for Marlow decides to act in complicity with the moral duplicity of European imperialism and settles for a lie leaving imperialism undisputed. Marlowe returns to Brussels unable to disillusion the Intended. Finally, Marlow despairs of being able to make his listeners on board the Nellie understand his experience since they are "each moored with two good addresses"[16] in their bright world of London and cannot imagine the darkness that characterizes Africa.

The dominant theme of the novel is the critique of imperialism. It is shown to be funded solely by greed and managed by petty and inefficient men. The usual justifications of imperialism, bringing enlightenment or Christianity to the ignorant heathens, are shown to be absurd lies intended only to appease the conscience of Europeans who profit from the rewards of trade. In place of the benevolence that should characterize the European's presence in Africa, the destruction and inhuman treatment of the Africans is clearly depicted throughout Marlow's journey. It is intentionally ironic that the black man in the novel has a purer (whiter) heart than the white man, whose heart is dark and cruel (black).[17]

Conrad was a pessimist who believed that human nature is largely corrupt, weak and fallible. This leads him to the insight that since the 'civilized' people are not likely to be much better if at all than the so called inferior races then we might as well leave remote nations alone. His rationale sometimes leads him to imply that the primitive people may in fact be healthier, more vital and better attuned to their environment than the Europeans. This is implied in Marlow's description, in *Heart of Darkness*, of the Africans paddling their canoe powerfully through the surf. Conrad is here cleverly inferring that in a struggle for survival the victors may simply be the more ruthless, cunning or physically tough, like the Manager in *Heart of Darkness*, rather than those who in any moral sense are fittest or higher.[18] Similarly, Conrad is skilled at deflating the pride of those who think that Europeans are more civilized than the native Africans, for what peter Nazareth notices about Marlow is also true of Conrad, that while he went to Africa expecting to find the darkness there, and in Africans, he had to admit in spite of himself that the darkness is in us, i.e. Europeans.[19]

What accounts for this shift in Conrad's point of view, from the young seaman's apparently undiscerning view of his own role in colonialism to the inexperienced novelist's desire to expose imperialism's deceitful pretensions of goodwill, lies partly in the complex ways in which Conrad's attitudes to imperialism were initially shaped. For it was possible for someone in Conrad's unique position to see beyond the bright veneer of the empire's so called civilizing mission in Africa and to notice as he soon did, the disparity between that facade and the actuality of grabbing 'for the sake of what could be got'.[20] He understood that under all the 'civilizing' talk, the business of extending and annexing colonial positions resulted from economic needs. The company was indeed run for profit, as Marlow reminds his sentimental aunt.

Thus, though "heart of darkness"[21] refers to the interior of darkest Africa, yet the reader is soon reminded of ways in which London, centre of the empire, 'on which the sun never sets', can itself be a heart of darkness . The novel itself begins with the anonymous narrator speaking with romantic eloquence of all the great men who have sailed forth on the Thames, when Marlow interjects "And this also … has been one of the dark places of the earth"[22], and proceeds to remind him that Britain would once have seemed as savage a wilderness to Roman colonizers as Africa now seems to the Europeans. This is a fatal rebuke to the proponents of imperialism and to the believers in the permanence of civilization. It invokes a humiliating chronological perspective, where being a civilized race is not related to their place on the evolutionary scale but rather to mere historical circumstances, "truth stripped of its cloak of time".[23]

From the outset, the narrative probes, questions and subverts familiar contrasts between the past and the present, between the old and the new, between the savage and the civilized, and the reader is quickly forced to realize that depending on where you stand, the liberators become oppressors and those who come under the guise of friendship are in fact enemies. So nations should look to their own past history to remind them of their position on the evolutionary scale and realize that this scale can shift with time so that one nation's past becomes another nation's present making the history of mankind and nations relative and turn taking.

NOTES

1. quoted in Cedric Watts, 'Heart of Darkness', *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*, ed. J.H. Stape, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), p. 48.
2. Andrew Michael Roberts, ed., *Joseph Conrad*, (London : Longman, 1998), p. 32.
3. Ibid., p. 33.
4. Cedric Watts, *A Preface to Conrad*, (London: Longman, 1993), p. 25.
5. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, Beirut: York Press, 2011, p. 3. (All further references to the novel are taken from this edition).
6. Ibid., p. 3.
7. Ibid., p. 4.
8. Ibid., p. 5.
9. *Heart of Darkness*, p. 7.
10. The phrase "The White Man's Burden" is taken from a poem of the same title by Rudyard Kipling published in 1899.
11. quoted in Roberts, p. 33.
12. Roberts, p. 35.
13. Mohit K. Ray,ed., *The Atlantic Critical Studies: Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness*, (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributers, 2006), p. 139.
14. *Heart of Darkness*, p. 52.
15. Ibid. p. 52.
16. Ibid. p. 70.
17. Ray, p. 137.
18. Cedric Watts, *A Preface to Conrad*, (London : Longman,1993), p. 87.
19. Andrea White, 'Conrad and Imperialism', *The Cambridge Companion to Joseph Conrad*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 181.
20. Ibid., p. 183.
21. *Heart of Darkness*, p. 51.
22. see note 7.
23. *Heart of Darkness*, p. 53.

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[1] Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness.* Beirut: York Press, 2011.
[2] Ray, Mohit K.ed. *The Atlantic Critical Studies: Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness.* New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributers, 2006.
[3] Roberts, Andrew Michael. *Joseph Conrad.* London: Longman, 1998.
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[5] Watts, Cedric. *A Preface to Conrad*. London : Longman, 1993.
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