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English 302

26 November 2017

Waste and Moral Ambiguity in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

In the late nineteenth century, Belgium's King Leopold took over the Congo because Belgium did not have their own colony while they were surrounded by other countries that represented colonial powers of the time. Once they colonized, the Belgians realized that there was a natural resource that could be sold back to Europe for a profit: rubber. Joseph Conrad had the chance to go to the Congo while it was under Belgian control and wrote the novel, *Heart of Darkness*, using the fictional character, Marlow, to provide an account of what was going on. Though Conrad replaces rubber with ivory in his novel, *Heart of Darkness* provides depictions of the brutality that the native people suffered as a result of the colonization and the trade of resources that the Belgians did not rightfully own. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* provides criticism of Belgium's colonization of the Congo through the themes of mass waste and moral ambiguity, challenging the romanticized narrative of Leopold's reign over the territory.

The theme of the mass waste of both tangible and intangible resources, and human life shows the utter disorganization of the colonization of the Congo. Throughout the novella, there are abandoned construction projects, and employees wandering around without a clue. At the beginning of the novella, Marlow encounters workers blasting the side of the cliff: "[a] heavy and dull detonation shook the ground, a puff of smoke came out of the cliff, and that was all. No change appeared on the face of the rock. They were building a railway. The cliff was not in the

way or anything; but this objectless blasting was all the work going on" (Conrad 28). The Belgian colonizers are wasting money by buying explosives and employee time only to blow up landscapes that do not need to be altered. There is no apparent reason for the cliff to be blown as the explosions that are being conducted are described as "objectless"; they are only wasting their resources. This is not the only scene where Marlow encounters a waste of resources. Upon arrival at the central station, Marlow is appalled by what he sees. He describes the station as this:

A neglected gap was all the gate it had, and the first glance at the place was enough to let you see the flabby devil was running that show. White men with long staves in their hands appeared languidly from amongst the buildings, strolling up to take a look at me, and then retired out of sight somewhere. (44)

The waste of labor at the central station indicates a lack of reason for being there in the Congo. The men with the staves are there in hopes to get a better job. They remain unproductive but want a job at the trading post. The whole operation in the Congo in Marlow's eyes is unorganized and unproductive, leaving room only for the nasty side effects. This undermines the Belgian presence in the Congo.

The waste of human life is something that Marlow asserts his distaste for as well. Marlow dislikes the treatment of the Congo natives as expressed by his repulsion when learning about the Grove of Death and what Belgian colonizers like him had done to them. The Grove of Death has come to be the ultimate symbol of mass waste. The grove is described as having an abundance of rivets that are scattered around as well as drainage pipes that are damaged and unusable, likely from an abandoned construction project. The Grove of death is not only a place of waste for tangible resources but also human life. It is where the natives who are sick, starved,

and unable to be a useful body for menial labor are sent to die a slow and agonizing death.

Marlow describes what he sees:

Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair... They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now— nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation. (Conrad 31)

The Belgian colonizers have a complete disregard for the lives of the native people. Once they have little use for the natives, they are thrown out like trash, not to receive any of the little care they had before. This disturbs Marlow and he offers a biscuit to one of the dying natives (32). The waste of human life in this novel is colossal and unnecessary. There is no reason for the Belgians to be in the Congo, yet they continue to profit off of stolen resources and commit mass murder against the Congolese.

The waste of human life connects to another theme: moral ambiguity. What are the characteristics of someone or a culture that is civilized? According to the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, the word “moral” is defined as “concerned with the principles of right and wrong behaviour”. This renders the entire definition of "moral" as arbitrary because differences between right and wrong are culturally defined. What Belgians consider to be moral may not be what the Congolese think is moral. Belgian colonizers in the novel are using the guise of civilization and morals to justify their brutality. They believe that they are bringing these two things to the natives. This is evident by Kurtz's reputation among the people of the central station. Kurtz, the chief of the inner station in the Congo, is referred to as a "universal genius" (Conrad 55). He

embodies all the ideal characteristics that western culture values and is thought of as a living symbol of bringing moral order to the Congolese. However, Marlow finds that Kurtz has become a brutal dictator of the inner station. The natives worship him like he is a god. He uses brutality to keep the natives in line and productive. This is evident by the heads of "rebels" that Kurtz mounts on spears around the station; all of the heads are turned to face his home. Violence is a method used to keep the supply of ivory running. In his article "Post-Colonial Analysis of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," Samet Güven argues that Kurtz's savagery is brought on by his own greed and passion for the ivory trade, rather than the wish to bring civilization and morals to the native people. The savagery in the novel does not originate in the Congolese but is brought over from Belgian colonizers (83-85). Thus, in this case, the Congolese are the ones with morals, and the Belgians, specifically Kurtz in this case, are the ones without morals.

The themes of mass waste and moral ambiguity challenge the romantic ideas that were circulated in the public eye in Europe at the time. During the period in which King Leopold of Belgium was colonizing and exploiting the Congo for its prime resource, rubber, Belgium used the guise of civilization to justify their presence. While the idea of bringing civilization to the Congo implies that the Congolese are savages, profits were at the forefront of Leopold's intentions. While the Belgians are exploiting the natives and killing them in terms that can be adequately described as genocide, the mainstream is turning a blind eye to the fact. The propaganda of romance is pushed by Leopold even though his only desire is to profit from the Congo's resources (*Congo*). According to the documentary *Congo: White King, Red Rubber, Black Death*, King Leopold did not take over the Congo for reasons of rubber or bringing "civilization" to the natives, but for appearances. "[a]t the start of Leopold's Reign, the Congo

was unknown territory to Europeans. For Leopold, it represented his last chance. The Congo was to be his new colony at any cost". Leopold had no reason to be in the Congo in the first place, yet he invaded a culture under the guise of civilization and proceeded to profit from that lie.

Though *Heart of Darkness* does seem to challenge Belgium's gross invasion of the Congo, it is not without its flaws. Chinua Achebe claims that *Heart of darkness* is a racist novel. Achebe cites that Africa is made to be "the other world" and the "antithesis of Europe". Achebe is right. If Europe and western values are seen as all things that are good, and Africa is the polar opposite of that, then that is a form a racism. However, the fact that racism and colonization may operate in unison does not mean that they are mutually exclusive. Colonization can take place without racism being a factor, and racism can be prevalent in a society without colonization taking place. This means that *Heart of Darkness* can still be criticizing Belgium's brutal imperialization of the Congolese without being anti-racist.

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