

Keeping Up Appearances: An examination of Europe's claim to superiority in the colonization of Africa as seen in Conrad's The Heart of Darkness

Just beyond the “biggest and greatest town on earth”, four men sit patiently on their boat, waiting for the serene waters of the Thames to ebb (65). One of the men, a Buddha, breaks the silence, saying, “and this also...has been one of the dark places of the earth” (67). This pensive and peaceful idol, Marlow, explains to his apathetic listeners how a great civilization is blindly made out of a darkness, remarking, “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” (70). The irony with which Marlow looks upon colonization suggests that this redeeming feature, “...Europe's claim to be civilized, and therefore superior, needs earnest reexamination” (Sarvan). As Sarvan suggests, Heart of Darkness contrasts the appearance of African “savagery” with European “civility” to demonstrate the inhumanity of the Europeans, rather than that of the Africans.

Conrad's dehumanizing descriptions of the Africans serve to show the inhuman effects of colonialism, rather than to demean the African people. For example, Sarvan notes that when an African is “reclaimed” by serving the Europeans, “...it is grim irony because he has been reclaimed to a worse state of barbarism.” When Marlow reaches the first station, he notices one of the “reclaimed” in a uniform jacket missing a button and notes, “...[He] seemed to take me into partnership in his exalted trust...I also was a part of the great cause of these high and just proceedings” (82). By ironically referring to a “reclaimed” African as a shoddy mimicry of European civility, Marlow reveals his disgust with European colonialism. Marlow's ironic comments on the degradation of the

African people continue as he describes a “useful” fireman who had been instructed to fire a boiler properly, lest an “evil spirit...take a terrible vengeance” (110). By referring to this man as, “...an improved specimen” and by describing his appearance as, “...a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind-legs,” Marlow suggests that the man is in a much worse state now than when he had been a “barbarian” (109). Marlow bitterly remarks that, “He ought to have been...on the bank, instead of ...full of improving knowledge...A few months of training had done for that really fine chap” (109-110). In effect, the white men, who possessed the “civility” to teach the “savages” properly, choose to reduce them to “parodies” who live in fear and degradation.

When Marlow describes the dying Africans in the “grove of death,” he does not mean to dehumanize them, but suggests that the inhumanity of colonialism has reduced them to their present state. Striking an obvious blow to European colonialism, he narrates, “[The Africans] were nothing earthly now...Lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest” (83). By describing the Africans as an inefficient work force, Marlow does not demean their humanity, but ironically refers to the inhumanity of the Europeans responsible for the Africans’ unfortunate state. Later, Marlow contrasts this scene of hopeless death with the vibrant image of the natives yelling and stamping their feet on the shore. At this point, Marlow denies that these people could be inhuman and contemplates the kinship which he feels, uncomfortably, binds Europeans and Africans together.

Thrilled by the thought of the Africans’ humanity, Marlow says that when “principles...[and] acquisitions...fly off at the first good shake”, all that remains is the truth of humanity. Therefore, Marlow’s descriptions of the Africans as degraded or

ridiculous demonstrate the inhumanity of colonialism that has lowered the “savages” to their present condition.

In his criticism, Sarvan claims that the Europeans, rather than the Africans, are barbaric by contrasting the “subtle horrors” manifested by almost all the Europeans Marlow meets with the “savagery” of the Africans. When Marlow arrives at the first station, he playfully admits his respect for the company’s chief accountant because, “...in the great demoralization of the land he kept up his appearance” (84-85). This ironic sentiment contrasts sharply with the horror of the phantom-like Africans dying like flies, just outside the accountant’s door. The “subtle horror” of this European fashion wonder develops further when Marlow reveals the accountant’s composure and even annoyance concerning the death and demoralization that surround him. The fact that the accountant would step out of his office “to get a breath of fresh air” so near the “grove of death,” as though it was a park, immediately strikes Marlow as “odd” (84). Later, the accountant becomes annoyed with the invalid dying in his office and even complains that the dying man’s sighs ruin his concentration and interfere with his work. Clearly, the first “civilized” European Marlow meets in Africa manifests “subtle horrors” with his callous, even savage, reactions towards death, despite his “civil” emphasis on appearance.

Several times during his voyage, Marlow remarks upon the greed and cruelty of the European pilgrims in contrast to the respect he feels for the restraint shown by the Africans. At the first station, Marlow observes the pilgrims’ hypocrisy and treachery when he describes the slandering and “back-biting” that they commit in attempting to acquire a high appointment at an ivory trading post. Marlow recognizes the “subtle horror” in the European pilgrim’s greed when he says that nothing ever really came of the

plots against each other, and that, “It was as unreal as everything else--as the philanthropic pretense of the whole concern...” (93). Later, Marlow contrasts the European pilgrims’ cowardice with the strength of the Africans during the river trip. When the steamboat whistle scares away some attacking Africans, one pilgrim in pink pajamas brags that he and the other Europeans had “slaughtered” the attackers, and Marlow ironically notes that, “[the pilgrim] positively danced, the blood-thirsty little gingery beggar. And he had nearly fainted when he saw the wounded man! I could not help saying, ‘You made a glorious lot of smoke, anyhow’” (130). Such European hypocrisy and pompousness contrasts with the respect Marlow feels for the wood-cutter cannibals on board, who demonstrate impressive restraint in the face of lingering starvation. Marlow marvels at their courage and strength, and reveals his surprise when he says, “...I saw that something restraining, one of those human secrets that baffle probability, had come into play there...Restraint! I would just as soon have expected restraint from a hyena prowling amongst the corpses of a battlefield” (117). As Sarvan remarked, the contrast made between the Europeans’ blood-thirsty cruelty and the Africans’ “dazzling” restraint seriously questions European “superiority” and humanity.

Of course the most celebrated white man Marlow finally meets on his voyage is the enigmatic Mr. Kurtz, whose greed and inhumanity question Europe’s claim to a higher “civilization”. After hearing of Kurtz’s success and “genius” from other greedy Europeans such as the manager, Marlow finally discovers that Kurtz has been posing as a god to compel the Africans to wage wars for ivory. The horror of Kurtz’s corruption first strikes Marlow when he sees the shriveled human heads decorating the fence posts surrounding Kurtz’s station. At this point, Marlow realizes that, unlike the wood-cutters,

“...Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts...” (138). When Kurtz tries to crawl back to the Africans, Marlow realizes that he has absolutely no restraint over himself, which contrasts sharply with the starving cannibals. Marlow discovers another window into Kurtz’s soul when he reads Kurtz’s report, which begins with such idealistic themes as, “By the simple exercise of our [the Europeans’] will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded [over the Africans]...” (127-128). However, this nobly-worded, altruistic report ends with the “luminous and terrifying” phrase, “Exterminate all the brutes!” (128). Shocked, Marlow’s rising enthusiasm for “the cause” is dashed to bits, and he resolves to take care of Kurtz’s memory and never to let anyone else look upon these ignoble words. Although Marlow’s reasons for hiding the truth about Kurtz remain an ultimate mystery, evidence suggests that Marlow wishes to protect others from the inhumanity of this “civilized” European. Marlow suggests that even Kurtz himself finally glimpses the truth of his corrupted soul when he expresses self-knowledge with his dying words, “The horror! The horror!” (154). In addition to protecting the report, Marlow protects the “Intended” from these revealing words by telling her that Kurtz’s last words were her name. After all, Marlow believes that women are out of touch with the truth, and he feels that he must protect their idealism.

Therefore, Marlow defends the infamous Kurtz twice, not because he supports Kurtz’s racist ideas, but because he wants to protect others from such ugly sentiments and keep the spirit of idealism alive. Although other Europeans describe Kurtz as one of the “gang of virtue” and “an emissary of pity and science and progress”, Kurtz’s inhumanity and lack of restraint oppose the ideal that European “civilization” is superior to the “savagery” of the Africans. Therefore, Sarvan is justified in claiming that, while the

Europeans appear to be more civilized in their advances in technology and even fashion, the “subtle horrors” that they manifest is actually worse than the Africans’

“uncomplicated ‘savagery’” (Sarvan).

Marlow’s obsession with the colors white and black in Heart of Darkness ironically contrasts European “civility” with African “savagery to reexamine European superiority. In many instances, Marlow’s disgust with the white sepulchral city’s ignorance comes into direct opposition with his obsession with the darkness of Africa. Marlow describes the Europeans of the sepulchral city as, “...intruders whose knowledge of life was to me a pretence...[whose] assurance of perfect safety, was offensive to me” (156). However, Marlow prefers to laugh at the Europeans’ “stupid importance” and grin “...bitterly at perfectly respectable people” rather than enlighten them. When he finds Kurtz’s Intended in mourning even a year after Kurtz’s death, Marlow’s description of her focuses on “her forehead, smooth and white...illuminated by the light of belief and love” and notes how, in the darkening room, she catches the remaining light in all her pale features (161). Full of pity for this ignorant woman, Marlow finds that he cannot destroy her ignorant idealism by telling her the truth of Kurtz’s horrors because, “It would have been too dark...” (164). Clearly, the horrors of colonialism are so demoralizing, Marlow would rather allow the Europeans to go on believing in their superiority and idealistic virtues of colonialism than to admit the truth. By relating ignorance to the color white, Marlow’s bitterness towards the idealistic, white inhabitants of the white sepulchral city questions Europe’s claim to a superior civilization.

Likewise, Marlow's obsession with the blackness of Africa and the Africans does not serve to continually point out racial differences, but acts to question European superiority. As previously discussed, Marlow's disgust with white ignorance reveals his preference for the darkness of Africa. Even when Marlow describes the "black bones" and "black cloth" of the "black shapes...in the dim light" of the grove, he does not degrade the Africans, but links blackness with death and vividly reveals the inhumanity of European colonialism. In other instances, The Heart of Darkness refers to the color black when revealing Europe's suppressed feeling of kinship with the Africans. When Marlow's African helmsman lays dying at his feet, Marlow remarks that, although this "...savage...was no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara...that look he gave me...remains...in my memory—like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment" (128-129). In order to extend this feeling of kinship between Europeans and Africans, Marlow often describes parts of Europe as being dark, while the Africans sometimes have strikingly white features. For example, Marlow describes London as a dark and "brooding" town, while an African dying in the "grove of death" has a "white worsted...[which]looked startling round his black neck" (84). As Marlow "...penetrate[s] deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness", the intermingling of white and black creates a feeling of kinship between Europeans and Africans. The contrast between the connotations of white and black in The Heart of Darkness ironically suggests that European "superiority" is appearance only, as Sarvan suggests.

Having related these vivid descriptions of the events of his journey, the Buddha remains mysteriously silent on the topic of African culture. Indeed, Marlow never pretends to judge or even understand the Africans, as he has not actually experienced

their society. Clearly, Sarvan is right in claiming that the descriptions of Africa and black people in The Heart of Darkness actually refer to the condition of white men and colonization. By contrasting the demoralization of European civilization with the kinship and humanity of the “savage” Africans, Marlow’s narration seriously questions European “superiority”, and thus Europe’s idealistic justification for “the cause”. Interestingly, the lack of geographical names of places and people offers the possibility that Marlow’s “ironic voyage of discovery” could have happened anywhere. Indeed, the appearance of a fiendish black figure with his “long black legs, waving long black arms” is a mere illusion created by the fire behind him (148). The possibility that this wild and mysterious being in the midst of a great darkness could represent any man in any place lends a great sense of significance to Marlow’s “inconclusive experiences” (70). The irony of this dark portrayal of human nature is that humanity must hide from its own abomination in order to survive. Just as Marlow tells a detestable lie to hide the horrors of one man’s corrupted soul, it is ironic that the “taint of death, a flavor of morality” should protect idealism (96).