



Chapter V

Imperialism: Conrad's Heart of Darkness

As a result of his exotic description of eastern panoramas and the romantic atmosphere of unfamiliar regions in his works, Conrad was for a long time regarded as a writer of sea-tales and children's books. However, his use of bizarre settings is, in fact, only one aspect of his work. These remote curious regions were used by Conrad as testing grounds for the moral tenacity of the white men who came from "civilized" countries. Throughout his writing career, Conrad was obsessed with portraying the image of imperialism in his works. He explored the meaning and the significance of civilization, the extent to which the Europeans--the civilized men--could keep loyal to their noble mission to save the savages, and the impact caused by the intervention of the Europeans in the affairs of the people of "uncivilized" lands.

In most of Conrad's colonial fiction, the whites are "civilized" men, representatives of their "advanced" society, who have taken up themselves the mission to bring civilization to the "dark" continents. These white men believe themselves superior to those they came to "educate," "civilize," and "humanize," a belief that intensifies when they encounter the "natives." The chasm of inequality between the two is reinforced by the natives

themselves, as they bow to the white men's show of authority with both fear and respect. However, the white men--the civilized men--soon prove themselves unworthy of this devotion. In a masterful stroke of irony, Conrad reveals that without the trappings of civilization to support them, some change does occur to the imperialist agents: they become at least as "barbaric" as those they have come to civilize.

As this study has suggested, Conrad's works reveals his belief that "civilization" robs men of the inner strength required to cope with loneliness and isolation in a wild primitive land. As shown in "An Outpost of Progress" and Heart of Darkness, civilized men, like Calier, Kayert, and Kurts, depend greatly upon organized society, where social laws and restraints have been set up to protect men from themselves. Far from this organized society, these men are rendered helpless; they abuse the authority and trust they have been given because they lack the natives' self-restraints. When they are freed from their society's watchful eyes and are confronted with primitive savagery, they "do not know what use to make of their own freedom . . . their faculties, being both, through want of practice, incapable of independent thought."¹ The civilized man's confrontation

¹Joseph Conrad, "An Outpost of Progress," in Tales Unrest (London: J. M. Dent and Son Ltd., 1961), p. 91.

with pure savagery serves not to civilize the savage as intended, but to let loose upon the savage pent-up brutal instincts that are even more barbaric than those freely expressed by the native inhabitants of the primitive world. Kurtz, for example, allows himself to be debased by his voracious appetite for ivory. However great and noble his heart was, he goes "native." He becomes a social outcast, unworthy of his mission and of devotion given to him by the natives.

Kurtz's greed is representative of the basic inner flaw that results in the downfall of many of Conrad's characters. An obvious example of this is portrayed in Nostromo. In this, one of Conrad's greatest novels, silver enslaves most of the characters, and this greed for material wealth results in fatalities. Another example is Almayer, the protagonist of Conrad's first novel, Almayer's Folly, and a major character in An Outcast of the Island. Almayer dreams about material wealth and this dream overrides his moral concern, making him unsympathetic to the plight of the natives. The natives, as a result, intrigue to exterminate him and his realm. Jim in Lord Jim is also greedy, but for glory. Jim's greed blinds him to reality, and he, too, meets his doom.

These men's greed, however, is representative of a larger flaw--egoism. Conrad's imperialism is egocentric. Much like Ptolemy's plan of the Universe, these white men and the civilization they represent believe the world

revolves around them. Thus, instead of thinking altruistically about what they can do for the natives, these men are egoistically concerned about what they can get out of the natives and their primitive land. Instead of being "benign apostles of light," they become "rapacious apostles of imperialism." The ultimate outcome of this is psychological disorder and social chaos as white men like Jim, Kurtz and Lingard allow their weaknesses to wreak havoc upon themselves and the native communities they live in.

Although some of Conrad's characters, such as Lingard and even Jim, try to help improve the native communities, they fail to achieve their goals because they allow their egoism to interfere. Thus, the white men's intervention is usually destructive for both the white men themselves and the natives, as Conrad reflects in Jørgenson's warning to Lingard on his intervention in native politics at the Shore of Refuge. This is the irony of the supposed altruistic imperial mission that is revealed in his colonial fiction.

Progress in achieving the imperialistic ideal of civilizing the savages is rarely made in Conrad's work. Conrad also questions the assumption that imperialism and modern industrialization can bring progress to the "backward" countries. At the moment he sailed to and fro among the third world, he saw most Europeans were incapable of understanding themselves and this lack of

understanding results in hypocrisy. Thus, the white men exploited the land they had colonized under the guise of altruism. As clearly shown in Heart of Darkness, these men destroy rather than civilize the colonies. The blasting of the mountains to build a railway in Heart of Darkness is a stark example of this. And in Nostromo, Conrad further demonstrates that the flux of modern technology and civilization does not improve Costaguana. Conversely, the railway, the railroad, the telegraph and the mine are portrayed as invading forces which are incompatible with the environment of the community. The rattling noise of the mine and the noise of the running trains make life miserable for the people since these noises frighten them and disturb the timeless silence of the community. Charles Gould, the English owner of the silver mine, tries to persuade the people that the technology he has brought into the place is for their convenience; the fact is, however, that this technology was introduced for the benefit of his mine and his personal fortune.

Few imperialists, as Conrad shows, come to the colonies without this crippling hypocrisy. In his Last Essays, he states that "[t]he voyages of the early explorers were prompted by an acquisitive spirit, the idea of lucre in some form, the desire of trade or the desire

of loot, disguised in more or less fine words."² Conrad's doubt about imperialism and its effect is shown in Marlow's transformation from bold, self-confident person into self-doubting person after undergoing dark experience in the Congo.

However, that Conrad generally represented imperialism as a destructive force in his works does not mean that he was a thorough anti-imperialist. Although Conrad did hate the aggressive imperialism with which he was often confronted in various parts of the world, he admired pragmatic imperialism which he felt could be achieved if the white men remained faithful, from the beginning to the end, to their mission to civilize. This means that they ought to be loyal to the place and to the people they rule. Jim and Lingard nearly achieve that status of "colonist," but their achievements are hampered by their internal flaws. Jim is too thirsty for glory and honor while Lingard surrenders to his passion for a white woman. Thus, there are rarely imperialist figures in Conrad's works who actually achieve the status of "colonists" because they all lose sight of their mission in their pursuit of power, prestige, or prosperity.

²Joseph Conrad, Last Essays (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1928), p. 10.

This study also reveals Conrad's trust and faith in British imperialism in spite of the fact that British also exploited her colonies all over the world. His admiration of British imperialism probably derived from his thorough assimilation into the British way of life after his nationalization or from his subconscious attempt to look for a positive aspect of imperialism as Benita Parry states. Moreover, the yarn of Sir James Brooke, a British subject who ruled the Far East and became the "White Rajah" in a remote country, which Conrad had heard and read about as a child intensified his admiration of the British. In his colonial work, Conrad generally portrayed the British characters as nice and well-intentioned in their eagerness to improve the native countries, though failed because of their flaws, whereas the characters of other nationalities were wicked and representatives of imperialist antagonists. This is another interesting aspect which can be noticed in many of Conrad's works.

Actually, the imperialist experience and pressure that Conrad underwent served as a great inspiration to him in his choice of imperialist subjects and settings for his literary works. Moreover, since he grew up during a time when the empires were rapidly expanding, Conrad learned much about the influence and impact of such global expansion on the colonized and the colonizers. Thus, he was able to vividly portray the more negative aspects of

imperialism in his works and present to his readers the darker side of the imperialist coin.