
The Theme of Racism in Joseph Conrad's Works

The late 19th and early 20th centuries marked a time of empire-building for much of Europe. In *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad deals with one specific problem of European hegemony—the treatment of natives. Critics accuse Conrad of holding colonial bias in his writings, stereotyping "savage" natives and glorifying "benevolent" Europeans. Indeed, Conrad's main character and alter ego, Marlow, initially views the natives as being inferior to Europeans, but such was the commonly held anthropological view at the time. In order to be racist in a more useful sense, Marlow and Conrad must uphold the supposedly natural right of Europeans to dominate an inferior race throughout the whole novel. As Marlow's journey down the river progresses, however, Conrad does the opposite. He portrays the natives as abused by their colonial conquerors. Conrad shows that he is not racist by creating a progression of his protagonist in which subtle irony and the motif of restraint differentiate the natives from the Europeans.

Initially, Marlow believes the African natives are inferior to European colonists. Marlow reveals his racist position in his many descriptions of the natives. He calls them "niggers," "savages," "creatures," and "prehistoric." Such language is certainly ethnically insensitive. Furthermore, Marlow rarely refers to the natives as human or gives them human qualities. In fact, Marlow sees them as having more in common with the animals of the jungle than with humans. He describes one of these "creatures" as walking on all fours, like an animal. Marlow is particularly patronizing in his description of the savage who serves as fireman on the steamboat. Marlow describes him as an "improved specimen" (Conrad 109) over the other "specimens" who walk on all fours. Marlow again reduces the native by giving him animal characteristics in stating that looking at the fireman "was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs" (109). Marlow reduces the role of natives to that of trained animals. Marlow seems to believe that, much like a trained dog, the natives are incapable of higher thought and meaningful work. Marlow sums up his beliefs with the statement, "He was there below me," (109) meaning not only that the fireman was physically below him on the boat, but that he was also below him racially. Through a series of discoveries, however, Marlow's beliefs slowly change.

Conrad contrasts the restraint of the natives with the excess of Europeans. As Marlow journeys down the river, he meets many European colonists and many natives. These encounters allow him to make judgments about the behavior and righteousness of each of these peoples. Marlow discovers that while, at first glance, the natives lack many of the physical characteristics of European dignity, they best the Europeans in their moral restraint. One such group of natives encountered is the cannibals working Marlow's steamboat. Although they certainly run low on provisions, they do not resort to eating any of the crew to feed their primal instinct. Marlow

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"[looks] on them as you would on any human being, with a curiosity of their impulses, motives, capacities, weaknesses, when brought to the test of an inexorable physical necessity" (116). Through his survey, Marlow concludes their actions are due to their basic moral concept of "Restraint!"(116). Such restraint is entirely lacking in the colonists Marlow encounters. Marlow's first encounter is with a station manager. This manager justifies the beating of a native by saying, "Serve him right. Transgression-punishment-bang! Pitiless, Pitiless. That's the only way. This will prevent all conflagrations for the future" (95). Punishment is not necessarily the only way to prevent transgression, and using it as an end only serves to show this manager's lack of restraint. Marlow discovers Kurtz's lack of restraint soon after arriving at Kurtz's outpost. Marlow finds a series of shrunken heads on posts lining the bank of Kurtz's encampment. Marlow states, "There was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there. They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts" (138). Note the apparent contrast between the manager's and Mr. Kurtz's lack of restraint with that of the "savage natives." It is no wonder that Marlow "perceived-in a new light, as it were-how unwholesome the pilgrims looked" (116). Marlow comes to an epiphany regarding the moral righteousness of the colonists versus that of the natives. Certainly the lack of restraint on the part of the pilgrims would make the natives look morally superior.

Conrad uses irony to show how European colonists were unjustly abusive to their conquered natives. While Marlow sees the natives as "savages" and "creatures," he does not view them as the "criminals" and "enemies" the imperialists claim them to be. He does not wish to dominate the inferior race and is, conversely, appalled by the way the natives are mistreated. After being passed by a chain-gang of six black men, Marlow ironically says that he was, after all, "a part of the great cause of these high and just proceedings" (Conrad, 19). Being white, he naturally associates himself with the imperialists, but his statement mocks their motives. Conrad throws in moments of literary irony throughout the book. Early on, Marlow sarcastically justifies the nobility of European action in Africa by stating, "Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire" (67). At this point in the novel, Marlow is reflecting back on his experiences, mocking the so-called "noble" intentions of European colonists. The colonists certainly brought the sword; however, they simply used it to exploit the native peoples of Africa. Marlow reaches this ideological turning point when he witnesses the death of the native helmsman on his steamboat. Previously, Marlow had scorned this helmsman, viewed him as an inferior native. Once he is unavailable to steer the ship, however, Marlow notes how much he misses him. "I had to look after him," Marlow states. "I worried about his deficiencies, and thus a subtle bond had been created" (129). Once dismissing natives as automatically inferior, Marlow is now able to enjoy emotional bonds with them. Through his experiences, Marlow has gained a greater respect for the natives. In fact, Marlow goes as far as to say, "I am not prepared to affirm [Kurtz] was worth the life we lost in getting to him" (128). Here, subtle irony is used. Marlow is placing the life of a black (the helmsman) over

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the life of a white (Kurtz). By showing the opposite of what is expected, Marlow breaks the conventions set out previously in the novel.

Marlow comes to the realization that European exploitation of Africans is unjust. At the beginning of the novel, the Nellie is facing Africa, or, as it was called, the "heart of darkness." However, Marlow reflects, based upon his unique experiences in Africa, that Europe "has been one of the dark places of the earth" (67). Marlow then sets out to convince those on the ship that Europeans are the real evildoers and Africans are the exploited. Once he has achieved his task, the Nellie shifts course, pointing to England and "into the heart of immense darkness" (164). Conrad rests his case that the European "pilgrims" are far more evil than their African counterparts. Conrad proves that he is not truly a racist after all.

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