Civilized Savages: Racist Underpinnings of Colonialism in *Heart of Darkness* and "The Man Who Would Be King"

Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* and Rudyard Kipling's short story "The Man Who Would Be King" center on imperial England's colonization of Africa and India. The two narrated accounts explore the motivations that catalyzed imperialism, stated and actual, as well as the impact of colonization on both the subjugator and the subjugated. The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, using social and historical lenses, it aims to debunk the idea of colonization as noble and well-intentioned by defining it in terms of its common traits, goals, and methods as well as its real-world ramifications. Second, using these defining parameters, it attempts, through close textual reading and analysis, to compare and contrast each author's use of characterization, language, and setting as a way of pulling back Conrad and Kipling's thinly veiled attempts at moral sensitivity and false altruism to reveal imperialism's greed-driven racist underpinnings and paradoxical savagery as well as each author's imperialist sentiments as a revealing reflection of Europe's social and historical attitude toward race and class.

In order to recognize and understand colonization as depicted in *Heart of Darkness*, and "The Man Who Would Be King," it is important, first, to define it and to explore its history as well as its political implications and social effects. "Imperialism in the political and historical sense of the word is the subjugation of one people by another for the advantage of the dominant one" (Alatas 23). Historically, imperialism has exhibited several defining traits all of which are present in *Heart of Darkness* and "The Man Who Would Be King," represented through each story's depiction of characters, language, and settings. The first is exploitation by which the colonizing people use not only the native population as a labor force, but also the conquered land's natural resources for their own monetary gain. For example, imperialists commonly exported to their home countries raw materials from lands they colonized. Then, they

manufactured products using those exploited resources and, ultimately, sold those products in the colonies. A second trait of imperialism is tutelage. "The people dominated are considered a kind of ward within a tutelage system. They are taught certain things, they are asked to do certain things, they are organized towards certain ends and purposes laid out by the subjugating power" (23-24). For example, British colonizers introduced the rule of law, modern education, and free trade to native societies under the guise of altruistically advancing developing worlds. A third trait of imperialism is conformity. As a matter of practice, for example, when colonizers took over a land and its people, they imposed their language, religion, customs, and even dress on the natives in an effort to force their assimilation into the subjugating peoples' culture. This process of "civilizing" what subjugators perceived as natives' barbarically backward way of life was often referred to as "The White Man's Burden." Exploitation, tutelage, and conformity are all present in *Heart of Darkness* and "The Man Who Would Be King," represented through each story's depiction of characters, language, and settings.

Outside of these traits, imperialism is predicated on "the assumption of the superiority of the outside evaluator and the inferiority of the native being observed" (Kaplan 1). Because assumptions are instinctive by nature, "the outside evaluators" or, in this case, British colonizers operate within an inherent belief that they are superior in every way to the people they have come to colonize. Such assumptions work to create a clear separation between the colonizers and the colonized, a divide that is imperative to the imperialists' "sense of Self in contradistinction to the Other" (2). The colonizers do not know themselves outside of these definers and, so, use their presumed superiority to relate to each other and to the world around them. In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Charles Marlow, a steamboat captain, travels up the Congo to meet Kurtz, a highly reputed agent with the ivory trading Company for which they are both employed.

Throughout Marlow's journey, he "projects the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant beastiality" (Achebe 252).

Marlow demonstrates this overriding sense of imperialist superiority by dehumanizing the Africans he sees and encounters. He rarely, if ever, calls them men or describes them as entire human beings, but instead reduces them to mere body parts or, in some cases, glib stereotypes. For example, when Marlow stumbles across a shaded grove where many of the natives, after being worked and beaten within inches of their lives, have crawled away to die, he expresses deep pity and sympathy as he stands there "horror-struck" (Conrad 1902) at the sight. Yet from his description of them, one can barely discern he is speaking about human beings. At one point, in an act of humanity, Marlow offers one of the dying men a biscuit from his pocket. "Slowly the eyelids rose … and the fingers closed slowly around it" (1902). He does not assign the native any other attributes, nor does he give the native a voice or even a face. Rather, he reduced the dying native to nothing more than sunken eyes and bony fingers. One might surmise the reason is because to Marlow the natives to whom he assumes he is superior are less than men. They have yet to evolve and are thus merely "black shadows of disease and starvation … moribund shapes free as air – and nearly as thin" (1901), "black bones" (1902), "bundles of acute angles" (1902) and "creatures" (1902). As he observes their flaccid bodies, he notes, "one, with his chin propped on his knees, stared at nothing in an intolerable and appalling manner: his brother phantom rested its forehead, as if overcome with a great weariness" (1902). Thus, even when looking down on their suffering in a moment of supposed compassion, Marlow cannot help but express a level of disgust. Furthermore, he completely strips them of their humanness by referring to one of the dying men as an "it."

Marlow's unflattering description of the natives contrasts starkly from his description of the European accountant he encounters just a few lines down. There, he recalls "I met a white man, in such an unexpected elegance of get-up. [He wore] a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clear necktie, and varnished boots. No hat. Hair parted, brushed, oiled under a green-line parasol held in a big white hand. He was amazing" (1902). Marlow's portrayal of the accountant who, for all intents and purposes, is no less a stranger than the clique of dying Africans he just encountered, is a detailed one. Not only does he privy the reader to an exact head-to-toe image of the accountant, he also expresses admiration for and approval of him, dubbing the man "amazing." In the very next paragraph, Marlow calls the accountant a miracle and goes on to say that he respects him when in actuality he does not even know him. This insinuates an unspoken camaraderie between colonizers strictly built around race. The accountant is Western civilization personified. His skin color, attire, and speech reaffirm Marlow's sense of superior self. Because he finds them familiar and understandable, he construes them as respectable. The dying Africans serve only to distinguish the savage from the civilized, something Marlow works hard to illustrate throughout the entire story. Therefore, while Marlow may feel for the Africans, his sympathies are superficial at best. For his allegiance is determined, first and foremost, by race.

Kipling's "The Man Who Would Be King" differs somewhat in its characterization of imperialists and natives, but not in its message about each. In this short story, Peachy Carnehan and Daniel Dravot, two unsavory and relatively lowbrow Englishmen, plot to conquer and rule Kafiristan, a territory in remote Afghanistan. *Heart of Darkness* features binary characters—European and African, white and black, good and evil. The story favorably casts the former, generally depicting them as educated, articulate, and well-dressed, while the natives are

negatively characterized, often portrayed as subhuman in their barbarism. "The Man Who Would Be King," however, offers more nuanced characterization. In the story's opening scene, the narrator describes in detail the different classes of train cars. Due to budget cuts, he is forced to travel Intermediate, "which is very awful indeed" (Kipling 9). In addition to the lack of cushions, he complains that "population are either…Eurasian or native, which for a long night journey is nasty" (9). Through this brief description, the reader gains insight into British colonial India's racial hierarchy. Wealthy Europeans resided at the top of the totem pole followed by Eurasian or Europeans mixed with Asian descent. Below them came poor Europeans and, at the very bottom of the hierarchy, were the natives for whom the narrator and even Peachey, his loafer companion, harbored a considerable amount of disdain. While there exists a broader range of representation in regard to different classes amongst Europeans, there also exists the same assumption of imperialist superiority as in *Heart of Darkness* as well as an understanding of Self through the subjugation of Other. At one point in their discussion, Peachey, a lower-class Englishman, says to the narrator, a higher-class Englishmen, notes, "If India were filled with men like you and me…" (10), insinuating a camaraderie that transcends social class and is solely based on race. Likewise, the narrator repeatedly refers to Peachey, an admitted swindler whom he just met and somewhat condescendingly calls a loafer, as "my friend" (11).

The depiction of the colonized Indians in "The Man Who Would Be King" also differs from the depiction of the colonized Africans in *Heart of Darkness*. Whereas Conrad dehumanizes the African natives altogether, Peachy admiringly describes the Kafir men as "fair men—fairer than you or me—with yellow hair and remarkable well built" (81) and the Kafir "women of those parts [as] very beautiful" (43). Also, in terms of their society, the Kafirs have a discernable culture and customs. For instance, they have an established religion with a temple

and a priest and "two and thirty heathen idols" (43). They also have their own governing system with a chief and council as well as a set of laws that, among other things, forbid "daughters of men [to] marry gods or devils" (125). In this sense, the subjugated natives in "The Man Who Would Be King" are much more evolved and developed than the subjugated natives in *Heart of Darkness*, but, in the same vein, they are no less inferior to or victimized by the white imperialists who colonize them.

Like characterization, language establishes European superiority and dominance, further underscoring imperialism's racist underpinnings. In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow distinguishes between "the comprehensible language of civilized discourse and the incomprehensible noise of savages" (1). Kurtz, the man Marlow greatly admires and seeks to speak with throughout most of the story, writes a report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs contending that whites are like gods to savages and as such should use that power to achieve immeasurable good in Africa. Marlow calls the report beautiful and eloquent and claims that reading it left him "tingling with enthusiasm" (1927). "This was the unbounded power of eloquence—of words—of burning noble words" (1927) Marlow says, insinuating that civilized people are articulate, intellectual, cerebral. The fact that all of the European characters Marlow encounters are well-spoken, regardless of class or station, speaks to this point. Even Kurtz's enthusiastic follower, the uneducated young Russian, who, in essence, wanders his way down to the Congo, reads a complicated book on seamanship, replete with diagrams and tables. Communication, be it through speech or literature, is a mark of advancement, of civilization according to Marlow.

It only makes sense, then, that the natives do not speak. Rather, they are completely silent, or they make unintelligible noises. It is not the fact that Marlow cannot understand them

that betrays his underlying scorn; it is his consistently negative portrayal of how they communicate. The Africans do not speak, they "howl and leap, and [spin], and [make] horrid faces" (1916). They shriek in intolerable excess. They make "savage clamor" (1921). The only intelligible words spoken by an African in the entire story comes in the form of a curt, blood thirsty request from the steamboat headsman to catch the boat's attackers so that he can eat them. Refusing to give Africans a voice that reaches beyond grunts, shrieks and cannibalistic requests, only heightens their savagery. This is simply one more way Marlow manages to contrast "Self" with "Other" in order to illustrate the superiority of the former.

As with its use of characterization, "The Man Who Would Be King" offers a much more nuanced depiction of language as used by both the colonizers and the colonized, while still establishing the superiority of one over the other. The story's narrator is a journalist and highly skeptical intellectual. He is a realist who deals in facts and because of this Peachey and Dan seek his assistance, requesting maps and books to help them on their quest to conquer Kafiristan. The narrator, who finds Peachey and Dan's ambition utterly ridiculous, does not mince words, readily labeling them fools and warning, "You'll be turned back at the Frontier or cut up the minute you set foot in Afghanistan" (40-41). In contrast to the narrator, Peachey and Dan "are uneducated and corrupt adventurers, unscrupulous confidence men, common frauds, blackmailers and drunkards, who have…knocked about in various odd jobs, both legal and illegal…" (Myers 712-713). Education, intelligence, and articulation are not assumed just by virtue of being white, neither are class or honor. Peachey and Dan are oafish and idiotic characters with a hairbrained scheme and questionable moral compasses. Thus, they lend credence to the assertion that historically, subjugated countries were "very often run by inferior talents" (24). Specifically, in the case of British colonization, "…those British personnel [within the colonies] … were inferior

talents, compared to what was available in Britain. Those who came from England were not the cream of British society. Those who went to serve in the colonies were people who could not get jobs and people who could not make good In England" (24).

No matter how uneducated or inept, however, Peachey and Dan still manage to surpass the Kafirs' below-average intelligence, further validating the superior status of white colonists. The natives have no cultural dialectic or recognition of cultural values other than the most debased English ones. Rather, the relationship of the imperialists and the natives is expressed purely in terms of brute force. "The adventurers' view of the natives is that they are meant to fight with, conquer and rule. The natives are expendable, inferior to the white man, easily dominated, and gullible" (715). Both Peachey and Dan refuse to acknowledge or recognize that the Kafirs have a viable life and culture of their own.

In addition to characterization and language, *Heart of Darkness* uses setting to establish Western superiority and to reaffirm the racism foundational to imperialism. As with his disparate representation of white and black characters, Marlow offers contrasting portrayals of European and African landscapes, positively describing one while using decidedly negative language to paint a picture of the other. The story begins on the Thames River, described as "tranquil, resting, peacefully 'at the decline of day after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks'" (252). Marlow draws a clear parallel between the story's British colonizers and the European body of water that flows through southern England, including London. He credits the river with a long history of providing a noble service to the people surrounding it. One can argue that colonizers also invasively blazed a path through lands that predated them and labeled their presence and consequent actions toward the natives of those lands as a good service.

The Congo River, on the other hand, "is the very antithesis of the Thames. …it has rendered no service and enjoys no old-age pension" (252). Instead, Marlow describes traveling down the Congo as "going…back to the earliest beginnings of the world" (1892), reinforcing the idea that Africa and its inhabitants are underdeveloped and primordial, in desperate need of westerners' superior intellect, cultured customs, and advanced technology. The only good he associates with the Congo River is the mystery it held for him as a child. As an adult however, he concedes "it was not a blank space any more. It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names. It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery—a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over" (1891). Or, in other words, the reality of Africa does not live up to all his childhood imagination dreamed it could be.

As a result, Marlow's description of Africa as he continues his excursion deeper into the Congo, becomes increasingly unflattering. He calls the land "a prehistoric earth," (1893) "an unknown planet," (1893) and "an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil" (1893). His choice of words is intentional, evocative. They underscore Africa as dark, mysterious. And, in place of the unknown, they paint frightening scenes and create a somber narrative of "Africa as the land of darkness, desserts, scarcity of water, place of death and loss of hope" (Nitonde 148). At the same time, Marlow arrogantly pegs African soil as a European inheritance, albeit a cursed one. An inheritance is a birthright, an entitlement. Certainly, Marlow's assertion speaks to imperialists' perceived sense of superiority that, according to their rationale, automatically affords them the right to both usurp another people's land and to subject those people to profound anguish and excessive toil in the process.

Another interpretation of *Heart of Darkness*' handling of its African setting is that it serves merely as a backdrop, a secondary factor to the story's ultimate objective, which is to

"ridicule Europe's civilizing mission to Africa" (Marx 46), but that argument is equally problematic. Using Africa "as [a] setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor" (47) or "as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity into which the wandering European enters at his own peril," (47) in and of itself belies perverse arrogance as it dehumanizes an entire continent and its inhabitants, reducing both to "the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind" (47).

"The Man Who Would Be King" approaches setting in much the same way as *Heart of Darkness*. Kafiristan, too, is framed as the mysterious unknown. As Peachey and Dan pour over books and maps in preparation for their voyage to Kafiristan, the narrator warns them that "all the information about the country is as sketchy and inaccurate as can be" (38). Interestingly, this held true historically as well. In the late nineteenth century, "the only accounts of Kafiristan had been obtained through Orientals themselves, whose statements had never been tested by the actual visit of Europeans to the country" (53). Explorers' general inability to reach Kafiristan and its surrounding regions shrouded the territory in mystery. It was "one of the few spots on the map removed from geographical reality" (Ridout 3).

There are two notable differences, however, between Marlow's depiction of Africa and Peachey and Dan's depiction of Kafiristan. First, Marlow replaces the blank spaces in his mind with outright fear and disgust, while Peachey and Dan "driven by the fantastical ideals of exploration and adventure … fill [it] with their own fantasies: to become Kings" (3). This means, the intent of each story's characters works to shape the setting within which they operate. Marlow travels into the Congo to retrieve Kurtz at the behest of the Company. The territory he finds himself in has long since been colonized. Imperialists have established a hierarchy and brutally enforce it. Marlow, then, arrives as an observer of circumstances already in play. And,

the many atrocities he witnesses tint his perception of his surroundings. Conversely, Peachey and Dan choose to go to Kafiristan, determined to reach the untouched region, subdue the Kafirs, and become their kings. Their roles in "The Man Who Would Be King," then, are decidedly more active than Marlow's role in *Heart of Darkness*. Their free will and deliberateness carry with them measured anticipation of what they will find. In turn, Kafiristan receives a much more favorable portrayal than does Africa. It takes on the role of the proverbial land of milk and honey, a mecca of barely tapped, ripe-for-the-picking resources. "Indeed, it [is] … a place of colonial fantasy where the white man's soul [seeks] refuge" (Nagai 100).

Second, while Marlow positively associates England with calm, civilized goodness, Peachey and Dan negatively cast it as restrictive, its government overbearing and stifling. They express outright frustration at the laws which prevent them, a couple of average joes, from colonizing other part of India and achieving the wealth, power, and status they so desperately seek. Of the British government, Peachey complains, "the country isn't half worked out because they that governs it won't let you touch it. They spend all their blessed time in governing it, and you can't lift a spade, nor chip a rock, nor look for oil, nor anything like that without all the Government saying—'Leave it alone and let us govern'" (32-33). The two adventurers use the prohibitive governing laws as a justification for their journey to remote Kafiristan, where "a man isn't crowded and can come to his own" (33) and "the Queen's writ [does] not run" (713).

It is important to note, however, that while "The Man Who Would Be King" offers a more positive view of Kafiristan than *Heart of Darkness* does of the Congo, Kipling's use of setting still supports the story's underlying imperialist sentiment. Peachey and Dan only understand Kafiristan's beauty, resources, and natives in terms of their own greed. Just as the colonizers in Conrad's novella, they operate within a presumed sense of superiority, and their

"ambitions are purely materialistic. They want to 'work' the country in order to increase their own personal revenue at the expense of their subjects" (713).

In the end, both Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Kipling's "The Man Who Would Be King" depict the British empire as operating within a strict racial hierarchy that places whites at the very top and natives at the very bottom. The social structure within which both operate is predicated on an asserted sense of superiority as well as on the assumed inferiority of the natives they subdue. Colonizers like Marlow, Peachey, and Dan use it to justify their actions, claiming the deceit and brutality with which they subjugate the Africans and the Kafirs, respectively, are benevolent in nature—a necessary evil to civilize the natives. In the process, imperialists, who fancy themselves demi-gods, learn to disregard any existing beliefs, customs, and cultures present prior to their arrival. Instead, defining all "Others" in terms of "Self," they use brute force to turn the natives into their slaves and subjects, readily exposing them to unimaginable anguish and toil along the way. By comparing and contrasting each author's use of characterization, language, and setting, their true motives and sentiments are made plain as is imperialist Europe's historical and social attitude toward race and class.

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