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Methods in Literary Criticism
5 March 2017
Mid-Term Draft

Understanding and Furthering the Model of Charlie Wesley's *Inscriptions of Resistance*

In his essay, *Inscriptions of Resistance in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness*, author Charlie Wesley develops a reading of *Heart of Darkness* in which he emphasizes references to native resistance within the novel. Wesley argues that "Critics have largely ignored or downplayed these inscriptions of resistance in Conrad's text," (21). These inscriptions, Wesley believes, are a "continual, sustained anxiety" throughout the novel, demonstrating, "the fantasy of stability and superiority endemic to imperialism," (21). His essay provides a useful framework for interpreting the novel, and he develops a discussion in an area which, he believes, has been mostly neglected within the secondary criticism of *Heart of Darkness*.

In the beginning of his essay, Wesley contrasts historical accounts of colonial officers discussing native resistance to those of Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*. He claims that the historical accounts of resistance attest to the "unbreakable spirit of the people of the Congo," but that, "The inscriptions of resistance in Conrad's text evoke a much richer, more nuanced and complex colonial history ... the acknowledgement of the possibility of resistance, as well as anxiety about maintaining order, is central to the dynamic of imperialism," (22). In other words, Wesley argues that his project of critically analyzing resistance within the novel is important because it offers complex insight into colonial history and those dynamics of imperialism which aren't evident within historical accounts.

So what are these complex insights? Wesley discusses the various ways in which these scenes may be analyzed, at length. Prior to this, he establishes a notion of "imperial audience"

wherein Marlow's story is "a dialogue directed specifically at an audience that is receptive to the codes and assumptions of the colonial project," (24). Since *Heart of Darkness* takes place on a ship with Marlow detailing his story to his peers, Wesley deems that, "Marlow's narrative is therefore an attempt to clarify the colonial experience to his fellows and to himself," (24). Reading Marlow's story as such, Wesley believes that we should analyze the text as containing concealed anxieties about forces which might threaten the colonial project. With this as a framework, Wesley discusses the complex dynamics underlying the latent anxieties of Marlow.

One area where Marlow's anxiety is especially telling lies within his concern towards the enforcement of the natives. After Marlow sees a man beaten for starting a fire, the chief responds to the groans of the beaten man by saying, "Serve him right. Transgression — Punishment — bang! Pitiless, pitiless. That's the only way. This will prevent all conflagrations for the future," (Conrad 40). As Wesley points out, discussions of enforcement such as this are indicative of an underlying anxiety that small, unpunished transgressions may lead to more serious acts of resistance. Implicit in this fear is the idea that the natives *are not powerless* — despite the fact that, as Wesley shows, **the narrative is functioning off of the colonial assumption that the natives "do not have the mental capacity for organization, outrage, or meaningful agency,"** (33). In other words, when Marlow includes in his narrative the punishment of natives as a response to acts of resistance, it demonstrates contradictory assumptions about the natives that are chief concerns of the imperial audience: namely, that the natives aren't capable of serious acts of resistance due to their inhumanity, and that the natives must also be punished and physically subordinated in order to maintain control and prevent large-scale resistance.

Another role that the inclusion of resistance plays, Wesley states, is that the scenes, "serve an important organizing function in the novella, helping to build suspense in a colonialist

Commented [1]: You might assess the validity of this claim by examining the role of the African mistress or natives that are seen in the jungle rather than as slaves. Do these characters lend toward Wesley's understanding or detract from it?

context that normalizes the subjugation of the natives,” (33). Thus, operating off of the assumption that Marlow speaks to an imperial audience, listeners (and readers) of Marlow’s story should assume that the moments of resistance are working, in some degree, to dramatize the story. When, after walking by six chained natives and expressing his willingness to fend them off by striking, Marlow narrates, “These were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men — men, I tell you” (Conrad 31), the fictional Marlow includes this, in part, to build suspense through the conditions of his narrative. Resistance, in this case, is a hypothetical - the prospect of the six men *being capable* of attacking Marlow. The hypothetical seems to be a rhetorical strategy of the narrator that builds suspense, while also normalizing violence between the natives and the imperials. That is, even though the resistance (and the response to that resistance) is merely hypothetical, it needs be included in the narrative because of the *possibility* and the *normality* of such incidents.

A final aspect of the incorporation of resistance within the novel that Wesley discusses is that, “the novella helps to highlight the colonialist concerns with control, order, and domination that could be decoded by its audiences,” (33). CONTINUE

Charlie Wesley constructs a lot of strong arguments for how readers should be analyzing the scenes of resistance. His most important argument, though, might be his claim that underlies all of his analyses: the idea that readers should interpret Marlow’s narrative as being directed towards an imperial audience. Indeed, if we are to accept this, as I think Wesley convincingly argues that we should, then the moments of resistance do seem to transmit a complex set of beliefs and anxieties that would have been central to the colonial project.

In my own reading of the novel, I gave little significance to the way in which the narrative is framed. I found myself reading as if I were in more direct conversation with Joseph

Commented [2]: Incidents in which mutual violence (i.e., resistance) occurs, or when natives are subjugated to prevent the possibility of resistance?

Commented [3]: It might be interesting to talk about this not only in terms of those reading Heart of Darkness, but the men on the Nellie who are hearing Marlow's story, playing with ivory dominoes and sitting on the Thames, immersed in empire themselves

Conrad, despite the narrative being posed as a story from a seaman to his peers. Because of this approach, I found myself attempting to attribute underlying values and assumptions of the novel more directly to Conrad himself. If, for example, I constructed a critical analysis of the moments of resistance in the novel as Wesley did, I may have determined that the anxieties/assumptions/values implicit in these moments were in some way the product of Conrad's own attitudes. I might, for instance, have concluded that Conrad was himself concerned with control, order, and domination, or that he was attempting to directly criticize those same values characteristic of the imperial powers of his time. What my reading failed to recognize, and what Wesley's *does recognize*, is that Conrad has created, in a sense, a product of representation. By choosing to frame the novel as a story of Marlow's, the narrative is disassociated from Conrad himself, and it becomes Conrad's *representation* of an imperialist account given to his imperialist peers. The underlying assumptions present in the account, then, become a choice of representation -- *not*, of authorial beliefs or intentions. This representation is meaningful, because as Wesley demonstrates, it includes rich and complex insights into the conditions and beliefs of the time -- insights which *might only be* presented through literary representation. Once we shift the focus to authorial beliefs and intentions, we get into discussions about values and value judgments, causing us to miss out on all of the historical insight present in the text.

To further Wesley's approach, I ask, what other valuable insights may we find hidden within the novel, given the assumption that Marlow's narrative should be interpreted as Conrad's representation of an imperial account towards an imperial audience? Borrowing from Wesley's model, how can we uncover more of the underlying values/beliefs of the imperial audience that make the novel more complex and insightful than a historical account?

Commented [4]: Many critics feel that Marlow's stories in various novels parallel Conrad's biography and that he serves as a mirror or extension of the author, rather than as a disassociated character. Does this alter your view of the narrative's purpose?

Commented [5]: That's an important counterpoint, and I'll have to add a paragraph to discuss that. I think that the two aren't exclusive -- Marlow can in many ways represent Conrad, but it can still be disassociated from Conrad himself. It could be argued that Conrad is aware of his limitations and so he created this representation so that it is always relevant, always possible to interpret/criticize/analyze.

Having posed these questions, I think there are plenty of places to borrow from the approach of Wesley and to generate useful discussion. In my own reading, and in my surveying of the secondary criticisms of *Heart of Darkness*, I have found that there has been a lack of attention given to the theme of nihilism present in the novel. Nihilism, the rejection of moral and religious principles predicated on the belief that life is void of meaning, is most visible in Marlow's fascination and dealings with Kurtz. When, for example, Marlow attempts to convince Kurtz to come back to the ship, he states that, "I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low ... There was nothing either above or below him — and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth," (Conrad 82). Marlow's reading of Kurtz is a nihilistic one -- Kurtz cannot be persuaded because he does not believe in any set of moral or religious principles in which Marlow would invoke through reasoning. Marlow, though, is fascinated by Kurtz and is deeply drawn to him, which I argue, shows Marlow's own concern with nihilistic thinking.

My former reading of this theme was such that I attributed Marlow's preoccupation with nihilism to Conrad's own preoccupations. I felt that Marlow was used to work through or to represent an inner-conflict present in the author. However, having read Charlie Wesley's approach to the novel, I am more inclined to read the theme of nihilism as representing a larger, cultural anxiety. In other words, Conrad chose to represent Marlow as concerned with nihilism in order to show a complex anxiety that lies deep beneath the imperialist values and beliefs. Just as Wesley argues that the inclusion of moments of resistance characterize imperial attitudes and anxieties of control and order, I would argue that the inclusion of nihilistic thought characterizes an imperialist anxiousness that *life is void of meaning*, and that the entire colonial project is predicated on fabricated values.

Commented [6]: This is a really interesting way of forwarding Wesley's ideas, I like it

Commented [7]: I understand the idea that it's based on fabricated values (i.e., the "philanthropic" mission of empire), but it may be useful to delve into the possibilities of a meaning, and why they don't work and/or contribute to a nihilistic perspective. For example, empire may be based around commodity fetishism/materialism instead of any moral values, making it void of meaning. Essentially, it may make your argument more clear to bridge the gap between denying the "fabricated values" and concluding it "void of meaning"

CONCLUSION

Commented [8]: Overall, I really like your essay! I think we both made the mistake of too much summary and too little analysis as we present the author's points — because of this I suggested some examples in the novel or ideas that you may want to apply to Wesley's ideas to test their strengths and weaknesses. You do a very good job in forwarding his argument in an interesting and valid way. It seems that you represent both his intentions and Heart of Darkness well in your interpretation and selected useful quotes.