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Methods in Literary Criticism

10 April 2017

Research Paper Proposal

**The Threat of Nihilism: Conrad’s Narrator as Conveying Cultural Anxieties**

The character of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* has been widely analyzed in secondary criticisms of the novel, although much of these analyses take the form of the question, *what are we supposed to make of Kurtz*? The analysis that I propose begins with a different form of questioning in which I ask, *what do the other characters make of Kurtz*, and *what might this tell us about* ***those*** *characters?* Having read the novel in this critical light, I develop an analysis of Kurtz in which Marlow’s views towards him offer insights as to Marlow’s own beliefs and concerns. Specifically, I argue that Marlow is himself concerned with the threat and/or allure of morally nihilistic thinking. Further, I analyze the meaning of Marlow’s inclusion of nihilism in his narrative within the greater context of Conrad’s representation of an imperialist account.

**Proposed Thesis:** In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow’s narration is embedded with philosophical concerns related to moral nihilism. These concerns, when considered as elements of Conrad’s representation of an imperialist account given to imperialist peers, are used to convey cultural anxieties that threatened the colonial project at the time of Conrad’s writing.

This thesis will be argued through a series of subclaims:

**Marlow as Storyteller**

Conrad frames the narrative as an imperialist account given to imperialist peers. As such, we should read Marlow’s narrative closely as containing underlying assumptions, beliefs, and anxieties central to the colonial project.

**Kurtz as Mirror**

In considering Kurtz as an element of Marlow’s narrative, his actual beliefs are inaccessible. Marlow projects beliefs onto Kurtz in a way that may or may not map onto reality (much like the intended does). In viewing Marlow’s narration of Kurtz as a projection, we may read Kurtz’ character descriptions as a reflection of certain anxieties held by Marlow -- ones which Conrad *chose to represent* in Marlow’s narrative to his peers.

**Nihilism**

Reading Kurtz as a mirror, Marlow seems to be strongly concerned with and/or attracted to forms of nihilist thought. By including these anxieties, Marlow shows that the colonial project is intimately connected to the threat/allure of nihilism.

**Historical Perspective**

There are many reasons to believe that Joseph Conrad was familiar with the works of his contemporary, Friedrich Nietzsche, who was perhaps the most influential nihilist thinker in history. This familiarity -- and the pervasiveness of Nietzsche’s thoughts on impacting art during this period -- suggest that Conrad included a theme of nihilism as a result of cultural impacts. Thus, we may read Marlow’ nihilistic concerns as Conrad’s representation of either his own concerns or the cultural concerns of that time.

**What Does This Mean?**

By closely examining moments of nihilist thought in *Heart of Darkness* we may uncover rich historical insights into the cultural and/or authorial preoccupations with nihilism. These preoccupations, in being represented within the context of a narrative of colonialism, demonstrate features of the complex relationship between nihilism and the colonial project.

Information sources:

My argument will rely primarily on the direct interpretation of Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness*. I will borrow from the work of Charlie Wesley in his paper, *Inscriptions of Resistance in Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness*, in order to articulate my approach of analyzing Marlow’s narrative account. I will include excerpts from Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* so that I may draw comparisons between Nietzsche’s philosophical novel and the reflections of Marlow. To strengthen my analysis of Marlow’s thoughts as following the form of moral nihilism, I will cite Wesley Brantlinger’s discussion of the novel in *Heart of Darkness: Anti-Imperialism, Racism, or Impressionism?* in which Brantlinger remarks on the theme of nihilism. I will then include an archived letter from Joseph Conrad to his friend Edward Garnett in which Conrad references Nietzsche. This letter, along with an analysis of its significance and a discussion of Nietzsche’s impact on Conrad as presented by Michael John DiSanto in his book *Under Conrad’s Eyes: The Novel as Criticism*, will allow me to develop a strong connection between Conrad and Nietzsche, suggesting a possible influence on Conrad’s novel. Finally, I will include discussions of the beliefs and/or intentions of Conrad in regards to morality. Here, I will incorporate ideas of Mark Wollaeger and Michael Lackey in their respective works, *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism*, and *The Moral Conditions for Genocide in Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness*. I will use their discussions of Conrad’s moral attitudes in order to forward my own idea for how we should interpret moments of nihilism in *Heart of Darkness*.

*I propose to complete this research paper as well as the accompanying presentation by* ***May 1st.***

Annotated Bibliography

Brantlinger, Patrick. ""Heart of Darkness": Anti-Imperialism, Racism, or

Impressionism?"*Criticism* 27.4 (1985): 363-85. *JSTOR [JSTOR]*. Web. 10 Apr. 2017.

In this essay, Patrick Brantlinger discusses in what light he believes we should view Conrad’s novel. His essay is in response to various secondary criticisms of the novel in which *Heart of Darkness* is declared to be anything from terribly racist to strongly anti-imperialist. Brantlinger argues that the novel is, in fact, both, and that its literary value resides in the fact that it uses the Impressionist style to present its contradictory messages as a harmonious whole. Brantlinger also analyzes how Kurtz’ nihilism makes him Conrad’s “hero of the spirit”. I will incorporate this discussion as a part of a developing analysis of the nihilism present in the novel.

Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. Ed. Ross C. Murfin. 3rd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave

Macmillan, 2011. Print.

*Heart of Darkness* is a novel where the main character Marlow narrates his experiences to his fellows about his voyage up the Congo River and into the heart of Africa. This provides the basis for my critical interpretation which will be informed by a close reading of the moments of nihilism throughout the novel.

Conrad, Joseph. Letter to Edward Garnett. Letter nos. 156-157. Letters From Joseph Conrad

1895-1924. Universal Library, Carnegie Mellon University, 10 April 2017. Web.

This letter, written as correspondence to Edward Garnett, contains a passing comment in which Conrad refers to Friedrich Nietzsche as ‘your Nietzsche.’ Conrad says this with regards to an essay written by Garnett that directly engaged with some of the works and ideas of Nietzsche. Conrad’s comment suggests a familiarity with Nietzsche, which I will argue as a basis for a possible influence on Conrad’s work.

DiSanto, Michael. *Under Conrad's Eyes: The Novel as Criticism*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP,

2014. Print.

In Michael DiSanto’s book, he discusses a variety of different influences on the work of Conrad. One such influence is the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, which DiSanto discusses at length. DiSanto shows that Conrad was in fact preoccupied with the works of Nietzsche, allowing for the comparisons between their work. I will include this part of DiSanto’s book in order to build a stronger argument for why we should read Marlow’s narrative as containing nihilistic themes similar to some contemporary works/philosophies of the time.

Lackey, Michael. "The Moral Conditions for Genocide in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness."

*College Literature* 32.1 (2005): 20-41. *JSTOR [JSTOR]*. Web. 10 Apr. 2017.

Author Michael Lackey presents an argument for how readers should interpret morality within *Heart of Darkness*. Lackey argues that, for Conrad, morality did not exist but instead was an empty tool used by political powers to exert control. Lackey includes historical biographical information which supports his argument. I will use Lackey’s argument to support my argument that Conrad includes the theme of nihilism to show that it threatens colonialism.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Trans. Thomas Common. Ed. Bill Chapko. N.p.:

n.p., n.d. Feedbooks, 2010. Web. 10 Apr. 2017.

Nietzsche’s philosophical novel presents perhaps the most prominent theme of nihilism in his works. I will include excerpts from his novel in order to show thematic similarities between his novel and Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. These similarities will help to develop my argument that Conrad’s work was influenced by contemporary nihilistic thought.

Wesley, Charlie. "Inscriptions of Resistance in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness." *Journal of*

*Modern Literature* 38.3 (2015): 20-37. *MLA International Bibliography [EBSCO]*. Web.

In this essay, author Charlie Wesley develops a critical analysis of the moments of resistance within *Heart of Darkness*. Wesleys approach is noteworthy, where he analyzes the narrative account of Marlow as containing underlying anxieties and beliefs. I will borrow from the approach of Wesley in order to develop a similar analysis of the moments of nihilism present in the novel.

Wollaeger, Mark A. *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990.

Print.

Mark Wollaeger’s book is a collection of essays with lengthy discussions of Joseph Conrad’s biographical information, thematic styling, philosophical beliefs, etc. His essays share a theme of skepticism wherein Wollaeger argues that Conrad was a deeply skeptical with regards to morality. Wollaeger’s book will help me to build a sense of Conrad’s propensity to include elements of skepticism in his works of art.