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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 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. I think that this point is strong, as Wesley's analyses of the historical and literary accounts do seem to contain different sets of information. However, Wesley spends little time actually discussing what these differences are. To strengthen Wesley's

approach, I would ask, what is it that makes the two accounts *inherently different*? In other words, why should we be studying *Heart of Darkness* as opposed to historical records of imperial accounts?

While the inherent difference between the historical and the literary is an important assumption of Wesley's argument, his primary work is in analyzing the complexities underlying the scenes of resistance. So what are the complex insights which Wesley argues are contained within *Heart of Darkness*? Prior to discussing this, Wesley 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. If we are to accept this premise, 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 fact, I think this might be Wesley's most important claim, since it offers a theory for how readers should analyze and interpret the novel. This theory, as I will discuss later, can be used to then analyze other areas which extend beyond the moments of resistance that Wesley discusses.

Following this premise, an area where Wesley's discussion of the anxieties of Marlow is particularly strong is with his analysis of Marlow's 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*. The rhetorical analysis of Marlow’s narrative is the strength of Wesley’s paper, as he clearly articulates the underlying anxieties that the narrative seems riddled with.

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 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 in a way which also normalizes violence. 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), Wesley argues, then, that 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 to be included in the narrative because of the *possibility* and the *normality* of such incidents. Once again, Wesley's analysis of the inclusion of resistance of this form is strong. It is especially indicative of his strategy to view Marlow as *an author*, allowing for the rich and nuanced readings that Wesley demonstrates.

An alternate approach, opposing that of Wesley's, would be to attribute, more directly, the underlying anxieties of the novel to Conrad, himself. With this reading, a critical analysis of the moments of resistance in the novel -- mirroring Wesley's -- may have determined that the anxieties/assumptions/values implicit in these moments were in some way the product of Conrad's own attitudes. This reading might, for instance, entail 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 this reading fails 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 (although this claim is still a bit murky). 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?

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.

Drawing from Charlie Wesley's approach to the novel, I would argue that the theme of nihilism represents 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.

All in all, Charlie Wesley develops a strong literary analysis of the inscriptions of resistance in *Heart of Darkness*. He does so by building off of two critical assumptions: that literary representations are more complex and nuanced than historical ones, and that Conrad's novel should be read as a representation of an imperial narrative given to imperial peers. If we are to accept these premises, there is little space to refute the claims of Wesley's exhaustive rhetorical analysis. Further, his model provides for plenty of space where we might extend his approach in order to develop rich and meaningful discussions throughout other areas of the novel. To borrow his terms in an awful, corny concluding line, my assessment of Wesley's essay bears no *inscriptions of resistance*.

## Works Cited

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