

Essay on compare and contrast an outpost of progress with the oustation

[Sociology](#), [Population](#)



These short stories are both written in English and deal with the past history of Empire. However, they differ in significant ways as this essay will demonstrate and, in their differences, they exhibit very different views of European colonization. 'An Outpost of Progress' is very critical of the notion of colonialism, while 'The Outstation' sees colonization in a more benevolent light.

Conrad's 'An Outpost of Progress' is set in the Belgian Congo towards the end of the 19th century. We can tell the colony is Belgian partly from the names of the characters (one is Flemish, the other French), but also because Conrad explicitly states that Carlier was "an ex-non-commissioned officer of cavalry in an army guaranteed from harm by several European Powers" (Conrad p 1) which is a reference to the Belgian Army. The setting is Africa, far from the coast, and Conrad describes it in a very negative way: the heat is oppressive and the station seems to Carlier and Kayerts very isolated and alien - "the impenetrable bush ... seemed to cut off the station from the rest of the world." (Conrad p 1). The 'station', of which Kayerts is the chief and Carlier the assistant, exists solely to trade with the native population in order to make money: the station's only purpose is to exploit economically the local indigenous population. Conrad makes it clear that both Kayerts and Carlier have only agreed to be posted abroad in order to make easy money very quickly. The surroundings in Conrad's story are hostile, alien and intimidating to the two Europeans who never leave the immediate vicinity of the station. The setting in Maugham's 'The Outstation' is completely different. It is set slightly later (after the First World War) and in Burma, a British colony. The Burmese jungle is described in beautiful terms, partly

because it reflects the feelings of the Resident at the outstation, Mr Warburton, who has worked there for over twenty years and has come to love the local people and the local landscape. Life in the Maugham story seems much more organized: Warburton speaks fluent Malay; the servants are respectful, polite and efficient; in the evenings Warburton and his assistant, Cooper, take walks on clearly defined paths in the vicinity of the outstation; the outstation seems to serve as an outpost of the British colonial administration and Warburton's role seems to be partly judicial, partly bureaucratic - he is certainly not there to make money: he is paid a salary by the British government. All this is in contrast to Conrad's description of the 'station' where Kayerts and Clavier are both newcomers, cannot communicate with the native population and really have no idea of what is going on.

The themes of the stories are very different too. Although they both deal with the effects of colonialism, they do so in different ways. Conrad's story is viciously critical of the effects of colonization and the motivations of those involved in it. This is reflected in the eventual fate of Kayerts and Clavier. Their relationship becomes more and more antagonistic until, partly through their mutual dread of the indigenous population, partly because of greed over the large amount of ivory that luckily comes their way, and partly through the effect on their minds of long months isolated in the wilderness which makes them distrust each other, Kayerts shoots Clavier and then hangs himself. In 'The Outstation' Maugham seems more interested in the English class system than in colonialism as such. His story revolves around

the Resident, Warburton, who is an English gentleman fond of boasting of the titled people he once socialized with, and the newcomer, Cooper, who has never been to Britain and who hates English snobbery. Warburton certainly is old-fashioned and set in his ways: he always dresses formally for dinner even when he dines alone; he carefully peruses the Births, Marriages and Deaths column of The Times; he is condescending and patronizing to the Malays and, Maugham reveals, he likes his position of authority:

He was no longer the sycophant craving the smiles of the great, he was the master whose word was law. He was gratified by the guard of Dyak soldiers who presented arms as he passed. He liked to sit in judgement on his fellow men. (Maugham p 6)

But despite these faults he does treat the Malays with justice and fairness. He dislikes Cooper because Cooper is not a 'gentleman' and their relationship deteriorates after Cooper reveals that Warburton is a laughing stock in the rest of Burma because of his snobbishness. However,

Cooper treats the Malays under his authority very harshly, so much so that all his servants desert him while Warburton is on an administrative trip upriver. Cooper is particularly unkind to Abas, from whom he withholds three months' wages. Warburton tries to warn him:

You do not know the Malay character. The Malays are very sensitive to injury and ridicule. They are passionate and revengeful. It is my duty to warn you that if you drive this boy beyond a certain point you run a great risk.

(Maugham p 18)

At the end of the story Cooper is found stabbed through the heart in his bed. Abas has a solid alibi but Warburton decides to pin the blame on him, but to give him a lenient sentence. We are never sure who killed Cooper, but Warburton's lenience is an exercise of the power he so enjoys and it also stems from the fact that he disliked Cooper intensely.

The mood of each story is very different. Conrad presents Afric as primitive and barbaric, and the colonizers as self-destructive and greedy. The very title of his story - 'An Outpost of Progress' - is ironic. The Belgians do not bring progress - they bring greed, violence and chaos. By contrast, Maugham is less critical of the British colonial project: Warburton is a vain, petty snob - but he does dispense justice fairly and it seems he is respected by the local population; it is Cooper who displays overtly racist attitudes - and he is killed at the end of the story.

In conclusion, Conrad's description of the setting reflects his critical view of the morally debilitating effects of racism. The hostility of the landscape is reflected in the violence that breaks out between Kayerts and Carlier. By contrast, Maugham more ordered description of the outstation reflects a greater sense of order, justice and morality that we find in the story.

Works Cited

Conrad, Joseph. 'An Outpost of Progress.' 1896. Web. March 29th 2011.

Maugham, W Somerset. 'The Outstation.' 1922. Web. March 29th 2011.