The binary of orientalism in heart of darkness

Literature, Novel

Constructing a narrative to impose order on an unfamiliar idea or place is a natural human impulse. Designed to change Ã¢€œRaw realities…from free-floating objects into units of knowledgeÃ¢€? (Said 67), narratives about the strange, the Ã¢€œunreal, Ã¢€? and the newly discovered inevitably arise. Equally inevitable is that fact that these narratives Ã¢€” theories, novels, descriptions, or whatever form they take Ã¢€” are nestled in a historical, political, and social discourse that their texts cannot transcend. An important question in engaging a narrative, then, is not only what the text intends to say, but how this intention is said. Joseph ConradÃ¢€™s Heart of Darkness is a particularly suitable novel to undergo this type of questioning. ConradÃ¢€™s classic novel is often praised as a text that worked against the imperialistic notions that pervaded the time of its writing. Upon closer reading, however, one can see that how the text formulates its ideas relies less on an anti-imperialist sentiment and more on Edward SaidÃ¢€™s notion of a binary system of Ã¢€œusÃ¢€? and Ã¢€œthem; Ã¢€? of West and East. Indeed, as Conrad constructs his narrative, he also constructs an unavoidably Western view, pitting the known against the unknown, the impenetrable against the Ã¢€œreal, Ã¢€? and ultimately creating a binary positioning of the African Ã¢€œnativesÃ¢€? and the Europeans who inhabit their country. ConradÃ¢€™s novel does not rely on any third person narration. Rather, almost the whole of the tale is framed by a character, Marlow, who is himself constructing a narrative. Thus, almost as soon as the seaman begins to tell the tale of his journey into the heart of Africa, the reader can expect to hear about his experience through a lens of displacement: MarlowÃ¢€™s story is not only constructed to make sense of

his journey, but also to Ã¢ locate himselfÃ¢ ? (Said 20), ideologically, vis-a-vis the Africa that he journeys through. In other words, by virtue of the narratorÃ¢ s nature, the kind of Ã¢ basic distinction between East and WestÃ¢ ? (Said 2) manifests itself not only in the physical experience of MarlowÃ¢ s journey, but also the Ã¢ style of thoughtÃ¢ ? (Said 2) in and through which the journey is told. The incident in the novel that most clearly conflates these physical and ideological points of view occurs early in MarlowÃ¢ s adventures, when he enters the office building of his future employers. On the map in the waiting room, he tells us, Ã¢ was a vast amount of red Ã¢ ” good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done there…a purple patch, to show where the jolly pioneers of progress drink the jolly lager-beer…I was going into the yellow. Dead in the centreÃ¢ ? (Conrad 74). Most of this description on MarlowÃ¢ s part is clearly tongue-in-cheek; the Ã¢ jolly pioneers of progressÃ¢ ? are victims of the seamanÃ¢ s skepticism towards the motives of his fellow adventurers and imperialism in general. Nonetheless, underlying MarlowÃ¢ s comments there are hints of what Said refers to as an Ã¢ imaginative geographyÃ¢ ? (55), an Ã¢ accepted grid for filteringÃ¢ ? (6) Africa, the strange or unknown space, into the consciousness of the Europeans traveling there. While we do not know what exactly the color boundaries stand for, we know that the distinctions are given in terms of the Europeans and their occupation of the continent: red and purple territories seem to be controlled by either a European nation or MarlowÃ¢ s company specifically. This kind of positional superiority can at first seem to be undermined by the fact that Marlow is going to a place Ã¢ dead in the

centreÃ¢ ? (Conrad 74), a spot physically and ideologically reserved for the West (Anderson 173-5). Reading on, however, we see that the center to which Marlow travels does not resemble the center-periphery structure that is usually employed: the yellow region is Ã¢ fascinating Ã¢ ” deadly Ã¢ ” like a snakeÃ¢ ? (Conrad 74). It is clearly not a European center, but one which, for Marlow, holds all the lure of the Orient that Said describes: exotic, dangerous, and perhaps most importantly, unknown. To know this sometimes dangerous unknown Ã¢ ” indeed, to have more knowledge of it than its very inhabitants Ã¢ ” is necessary for constructing a European view of dominance (Said 32). Knowledge and power are thus irrevocably intertwined: to know a place is to know exactly what is good for it and its populace, to be more civilized, to be superior. Conversely, then, the native population of such a place can only be backwards, inferior, ignorant. One can sense traces of this in MarlowÃ¢ s journey along the snake-like river, as he describes Ã¢ the smell of mud, of primeval mud…the high stillness of primeval forestÃ¢ ? (Conrad 96). The river and forest themselves are placed at the dawn of time; by inference, the inhabitants are no more advanced. Indeed, this attitude can be seen even more explicitly in MarlowÃ¢ s description of the cannibal group which he commands: Ã¢ I donÃ¢ t think a single one of them had any clear idea of time, as we at the end of countless ages have. They still belonged to the beginnings of time Ã¢ ” had no inheritance to teach them as it wereÃ¢ ? (Conrad 115). Just as the map in the office placed the African people in relation to the European imperialists spatially, here Marlow places them temporally, again with the Europeans in the obviously dominant position. Notice, too, that Marlow uses no proper

nouns, such as Ã¢â€œEuropeansÃ¢â€? or Ã¢â€œAfricansÃ¢â€? when describing this temporal difference. Instead, he uses the more vague Ã¢â€œtheyÃ¢â€? and Ã¢â€œwe. Ã¢â€? Despite the use of the less specific pronouns, the reader knows exactly who he is speaking of and for: by employing Ã¢â€œwe, Ã¢â€? he is representing the West, and Ã¢â€œthey, Ã¢â€? the other, the native population in general. Furthermore, in MarlowÃ¢â€™s wilderness, as in SaidÃ¢â€™s description of the Orient, knowledge does not only imply power, but also possession (Said 34-5). Through the seaman, who does not crave power, we see this in an opposite way: the African jungle is constantly being referred to as Ã¢â€œimpenetrableÃ¢â€? and therefore Ã¢â€œunrealÃ¢â€? (Conrad 93). Marlow struggles with this concept of the impenetrable throughout his travels: even his stay in the less remote station before heading into the jungle prompts an exclamation of Ã¢â€œIÃ¢â€™ve never seen anything so unreal in my lifeÃ¢â€? (Conrad 91). The only things that do seem real and reliable are those that can only be identified as Western to Marlow. When the seaman finds a nautical instruction book written by an Englishman, therefore, he is excited: Ã¢â€œThe simple old sailor, with his talk of chains and purchases, made me forget the jungle…in a delicious sensation of having come upon something unmistakably realÃ¢â€? (Conrad 111). On the other hand, Kurtz, the agent for whom Marlow is searching, desires that knowledge and power that does not affect Marlow. Just as Said shows that British officials controlling the Egyptian government believed they Ã¢â€œmade EgyptÃ¢â€? (35), Kurtz in a sense has Ã¢â€œmadeÃ¢â€? the environment in which he lives Ã¢â€” he practices native rituals, and the natives who surround his camp Ã¢â€œadore

him, Ã¢ 🕴 ? believing that he is a god (Conrad 118). Kurtz undeniably knows the African tribe of the area and has power over them Ã¢ 🕴 ” thus, at least in his own mind, he is in possession of the place insofar as he can create the place itself. Kurtz effectively transforms everything around him into a possession: as Marlow describes, Ã¢ 🕴 📝You should have heard him…my ivory, my station, my river…everything belonged to himÃ¢ 🕴 ? (Conrad 126). And, just as Ã¢ 🕴 📝all of Europe contributed to the making of KurtzÃ¢ 🕴 ? (Conrad 127), so does all of the Europe that underpins Heart of Darkness seem to contribute to the Ã¢ 🕴 📝making, Ã¢ 🕴 ? the representation, of Africa. Such a representation must necessarily include a description of the African people. According to SaidÃ¢ 🕴 🖂s study of Orientalism, what stems from the Western spatial and temporal placement of its colonies (as seen in the map and MarlowÃ¢ 🕴 🖂s comments above) is a hierarchical system of Ã ¢ 🕴 📝representative figures, or tropesÃ¢ 🕴 ? (71). In other words, what we as readers can expect is a Ã¢ 🕴 📝typicalÃ¢ 🕴 ? and general (Said 6) native representation, one which Ã¢ 🕴 📝polarize[s] the distinctionÃ¢ 🕴 ? (Said 46) between the West and the rest. This overarching, general representation is, in fact, what one finds in ConradÃ¢ 🕴 🖂s novel. Indeed, there is another binary positioning here: the reader hardly gets any specific descriptions of the Africans at all, while the white characters are often described in detail. The companyÃ¢ 🕴 🖂s chief accountant, according to Marlow, is Ã¢ 🕴 📝a sort of visionÃ¢ 🕴 ? with Ã¢ 🕴 📝white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clean necktie, and varnished boots. He was amazing, and had a penholder behind his earÃ¢ 🕴 ? (Conrad 84). Not two paragraphs later, we get our first description of the African natives: Ã¢ 🕴 📝Strings of dusty niggers with splay

feet arrived and departedÃ¢ ? (Conrad 85). Most of the descriptions of the Africans are in such plurals: Ã¢ streams of human beings Ã¢ ” of naked human beingsÃ¢ ” with spears in their hands…with wild glances and savage movements, were poured into the clearingÃ¢ ? (Conrad 140). And, while Marlow recognizes that these natives Ã¢ were not inhumanÃ¢ ? (Conrad 108), he nonetheless shudders at Ã¢ the thought of their humanity Ã¢ ” like yoursÃ¢ ? (108). A notable departure from the pluralizing of the African natives occurs in the descriptions of two of MarlowÃ¢ s workers: one who steers the ship, and the other who keeps the boiler running. As Said asserts, to the imperial West, eastern colonies are Ã¢ useful in the modern world only because the powerful and up-to-date empires have brought them out…of their declineÃ¢ ? (35). Such a principle can be applied to the apparent singling out of these two African men: both are described because, in MarlowÃ¢ s opinion, they are useful. Marlow, in giving special consideration to the death of his African helmsman, starts with a disclaimer: Ã¢ Perhaps you will think it passing strange this regret for a savage who was no more account than a grain of sand in a black SaharaÃ¢ ? (Conrad 128). In spite of this, however, Marlow Ã¢ missed himÃ¢ ? because Ã¢ he had done something…for months I had him at my back Ã¢ ” a help Ã¢ ” an instrumentÃ¢ ? (129). For the shipÃ¢ s boiler worker, this point of utility is even more explicit. He is the first African man who is described individually, but his description is related only to his use: Ã¢ He was an improved specimen…He was useful because he had been instructedÃ¢ ? (Conrad 109-10). A third departure from the generalization of a Ã¢ black SaharaÃ¢ ? comes conspicuously in the depiction of the

African woman who is connected with Kurtz. She is described in rich detail: Ã ¢ 🚹 🖆draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly…She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificentÃ¢ 🚹 ? (Conrad 142). This portrayal differs strikingly from MarlowÃ¢ 🚹 🖄s representation of the white women he encounters, all of whom are delicate and fair, and Ã¢ 🚹 🖆live in a world all their own…It is too beautiful altogetherÃ¢ 🚹 ? (Conrad 77). The seamanÃ¢ 🚹 🖄s attitude about women aside, the striking difference between these two portraits is the outright sensuality that the African woman radiates. Even KurtzÃ¢ 🚹 🖄s Ã¢ 🚹 🖆Intended, Ã¢ 🚹 ? the other woman who figures significantly in MarlowÃ¢ 🚹 🖄s narrative, is only virginal and dainty compared to the voluptuousness of the African native. Here again, we can invoke SaidÃ¢ 🚹 🖄s idea of a Ã¢ 🚹 🖆vocabularyÃ¢ 🚹 ? of the Orient and of a polarization of European and non-European. Africa is depicted through this woman, as in MarlowÃ¢ 🚹 🖄s description of the map, as alluring and dangerous, with Ã¢ 🚹 🖆revolting sensualityÃ¢ 🚹 ? (Said 69) Ã¢ 🚹 ” everything MarlowÃ¢ 🚹 🖄s Intended, the European woman, is not. The construction of any narrative is unavoidably steeped in its contemporary social and political background; MarlowÃ¢ 🚹 🖄s story, and Joseph ConradÃ¢ 🚹 🖄s, for that matter, are no exception. In Heart of Darkness, the reader inescapably views MarlowÃ¢ 🚹 🖄s world through Marlow Ã¢ 🚹 ” that is, though a Western lens. And it is through this lens that one often sees the creation of a Ã ¢ 🚹 🖆WesternÃ¢ 🚹 ? Africa, and the polarization of East and West that Said discusses. MarlowÃ¢ 🚹 🖄s depiction of the colonial African map emphasizes this binary spatially; his description of the native intellect emphasizes it temporally; and both his general and specific portraits of the African

inhabitants clearly marks the great distance between Ã¢ 🚹 🖆usÃ¢ 🚹 ? and Ã ¢ 🚹 🖆them. Ã¢ 🚹 ? While Heart of Darkness can certainly (and correctly) be praised for its anti-imperialist sentiments, we must remember that any work is tinged with the social discourses of its time Ã¢ 🚹 ” that Conrad himself could not help but, as Said warns, encounter the African colonies Ã¢ 🚹 🖆as a [Westerner] first, as an individual secondÃ¢ 🚹 ? (Said 11). Works

CitedAnderson, Benedict. Imagined Communities. New York: Verso, 1991. Conrad, Joseph. Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer. New York: Signet Classic, 1997. Said, Edward. Orientalism. New York: Vintage Books, 1978.