

# The irony of colonization through christianity: "an outpost to progress" by josep...

[Art & Culture](#), [Comedy](#)



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

## **The Irony of Colonization through Christianity: “ An Outpost to Progress” By Joseph Conrad Essay Sample**

“ An outpost to progress” focuses on the colonization of Africa near the end of the nineteenth century as it dares to question issues raised of colonization through Christianity. From the beginning of the story it becomes evident that the title, “ Outpost of Progress” is in itself ironic, as the two white men are shown to be lazy and incompetent. The story was written as a reference to the ivory trade and the colonization of Africa. Conrad uses irony throughout the story to candidly challenge the merits of colonization through Christianity. Conrad uses one of the most powerful and well known symbols of Christianity, the cross, as an ironic marker signaling Christianity’s unsuccessful effect on the wilderness and as an ironic benchmark measuring the moral values and facade of the Europeans designated to the trading post in Africa.

The story employs two eager Europeans, Kayerts and Carlier, who are appointed to a trading post in the African jungle. There they participate in and oversee the ivory trading, hoping for financial benefits for both the company and themselves. With limited roles in the trading, they become isolated and demoralized as time goes by. The cross is mentioned early in the story when the grave of the previous surveyor is examined. The complicity of Christianity within colonization becomes evident as Conrad uses the cross as a symbolic measure of the impact faith will have on Africa. Conrad’s irony becomes obvious: the cross’s awkward position reflects Christianity’s insignificance and unimportance in the African jungle. It is not

surprising to note that Christianity plays a limited role in redemption, salvation and eternal life within this story.

However, Conrad's main intention in the story is to weaken the superiority of white Europeans who exploit Africa's resources only to benefit for themselves. The colonization of Africa in the nineteenth century was far from the initial intentions of "bringing light and faith and commerce to the dark places of the earth" (Conrad 102) it was alleged to be. The cross, therefore, which presumably signifies the interference of civilization and progress upon the wilderness, instead becomes an ironic indicator of moral failure and economic opportunity. The trading post that Kayerts and Carlier are assigned to is anything but an outpost of progress; the men are lazy, incapable, and lack "all initiative." The native Makola, serving as Kayerts's and Carlier's bookkeeper, suggests a profitable exchange of slaves for ivory to the two men. Initially Kayerts and Carlier are stunned and offended by the idea, although eventually they accept the trade and help Makola for personal financial benefit. Through their greed for ivory, the men allow their native workers to be bartered to a marauding tribe.

Both men are continuously plagued by diseases and grow weak in body, mind and soul towards the end of the story. Their psychological health continues to deteriorate as the two men progressively go mad. Ideas that at first were thought to be unimaginable begin to appear financially beneficial forcing the men to submit to unethical and immoral behaviour. The deterioration of their ethical, moral and legal values bring about great consequence to the village they were set out to colonize and "save". Near

the end of the story, the villages view the white men as “ mysterious creatures...[who] should be left alone” (Conrad 109).

As a result of the ivory trade, the village is completely disrupted and deserted. It seems, quite ironically, that colonization accomplished the opposite of its initial intentions. Its intentions were annulled by the effect of cultural ignorance. Instead of bringing civilization, the traders have the people of the village sold as slaves. Instead of establishing a thriving, abundant flow of economy, they have brought emptiness, sorrow and great suffering. The effect of colonization takes the African village further away from a civilized community it was intended to be. Finally, a controversy over sugar generates an irrational, hysterical and brutal conflict between them, ending tragically as Kayerts accidentally shoots and kills Carlier. At the end of the story, just when the company steamboat approaches the station after half a year of isolation, Kayerts hangs himself out of desperation.

The story concludes with a focus on the cross in an ironic way: Kayerts commits suicide by hanging himself from the cross.

“ He had evidently climbed the grave, which was high and narrow, and after tying the end of the strap to the arm [of the cross], had swung himself off. His toes were only a couple of inches above the ground; his arms hung stiffly down; he seemed to be standing rigidly at attention, but with one purple cheek playfully posed on the shoulder. And, irreverently, he was putting out a swollen tongue...” (Conrad 110).

Conrad's irony here is cynical; the cross, symbolic of redemption, salvation and eternal life, serves as a gallows, and Kayerts is seemingly aware of his mockery of the crucifixion because his swollen tongue is stuck out “

irreverently.” Conrad uses the cross in this story as a parody of itself.

According to Conrad, Christianity can offer no guarantees, no redemption, no salvation, and eternal life to men in the African wilderness. Far from progressing, the two men have degenerated to a point where all evidence of civilization are lacking.

In conclusion, Conrad uses the Christian symbol of the cross to serve an ironic function to the deterioration of colonization efforts. The attempt of colonization through Christianity has failed in that the traders brought about the exact opposite of the intentions. The hypocrisy of Christianity is that the “civilized” men were supposed to introduce faith to the “savage” being so that they may find peace through redemption, salvation and eternal life. The irony of colonization is that the men in fact used the village to their selfish means. As a result of this attempt at colonization through Christianity, the village has been destroyed and the two men deteriorate in body, mind and soul to the point of death. The reality of this story is destruction and death, not an outpost and definitely not progress. According to Conrad, faith is just another illusion men grasp in order to bring order and sense to a hostile and indifferent place.

Work Cited

<https://assignbuster.com/the-irony-of-colonization-through-christianity-an-outpost-to-progress-by-joseph-conrad-essay-sample/>

Conrad, Joseph, “ An Outpost of Progress,” in Jon C. Stott, Raymond E. Jones, and Rick Bowers (ed), *The Harbrace Anthology of Literature* Toronto: Canada, 2006, 970-986.