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Anti-imperialism in the work of Joseph Conrad

Anti-imperialismus v díle Josepha Conrada

Bachelor Thesis

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I hereby confirm that I wrote the submitted thesis myself and I also confirm that the thesis includes a complete list of sources and literature cited.

In Olomouc
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Introduction

In my thesis I will focus on Conrad's short story *An Outpost of Progress* (1897) and his novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and I will search for the traces of anti-imperialistic attitudes harboured in it. I will consider historical background and Conrad's own life experiences and how these aspects could have influenced his writings. On this basis I will oppose some of the existing statements and accusations of Joseph Conrad being racist. In addition I will compare his writings with the works of other authors, who also took an interest in the topic of colonialism.

Work of every artist is without any doubt influenced by one's life experiences. Every writer, painter or even movie director's way of thinking, imagination and creative process is inevitably affected by one's own life stories, ordeals and people encountered in the course of life. Every single day brings us things that furtively and without our knowledge shape our mindset, attitudes and moral values.

Joseph Conrad was one of the creative people, whose life experiences had an immense impact on his work. He was born and spent his difficult childhood in Ukraine and his family suffered under the oppression of the Bolshevik Russia. He eventually managed to escape this and began to lead a life of a free man. In adulthood he travelled through the world and got to experience the horrors of the European imperialistic exploitations in Africa. The latter had a deep impact on his emotional state, left him scarred for life and these experiences are mirrored in some of his books.

Nevertheless, some people are still questioning Conrad's goodwill towards African people and go as far as calling him racist. A famous Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe held a controversial lecture which was subsequently published as an essay called "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness" in collection *Hopes and Impediments* (1988). In this essay, Achebe accuses Conrad of being "throughout racist"¹ and criticises the way he portrays native people. In Achebe's opinion, Conrad's writings may hold portion of responsibility for the wrong apprehension of African history and culture in general.

In my opinion the evidence of the very contrary lies in Conrad's life and work. Not only were the ideas behind *An Outpost of Progress* and *Heart of Darkness* not racist, in my opinion these were direct defences of the exploited lands and their native

¹ Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness," accessed July 19, 2014, <http://kirbyk.net/hod/image.of.africa.html>.

inhabitants. And since I am about to build my arguments on this, it is more than appropriate to take a brief look at historical background and Conrad's life story and its unquestionable influence on his writing and ideas behind it.

In the first chapter of my thesis I will take a quick look on colonial development in the end of 19th century, mainly on Belgian king Leopold and his establishment of colony in Congo. In the following chapter I will give a summary of Joseph Conrad's life and highlight the events that could influence his attitudes towards colonialism. In the third chapter I will analyze Conrad's portrayal of indigenous people of Africa in his short story *An Outpost of Progress* and his novel *Heart of Darkness*. In the following chapter I will consider his portrayal of colonists and critique of their actions and in the fifth and final chapter I will mention other books touching on the topic of colonialism and briefly summarize the differences in grasp of the topic.

I. Historical Background

There was a vast colonial expansion taking place among the European Great Powers in 1870s'. Over the following years these countries were conquering unclaimed land in order to express their dominancy and to make their territory more extensive and their power stronger. Occupying exotic land was a great opportunity to increase their wealth through exploiting local resources and using natives as a forced labour.

Leopold II inherited the country of Belgium and ascended its throne in 1865. His country ranked among the strongest colonial powers of Europe – France, Germany and Great Britain. Europe was on the threshold of industrial revolution, cities were getting larger, but Belgium was falling behind. This made Leopold feel frustrated and he decided to provide his country with large colony in order to make his country wealthier and more developed and competitive. Over eighty percent of Africa's land was still in the hands of native people in that time and King Leopold chose it as a target of his conquest.

Leopold promoted the establishment of his colony as an act of philanthropy. He convinced the public that he was trying to stop the slave trade and started to build hospices for travellers. Thanks to his campaign of misinformation he convinced other politicians that they are consenting with building of international trade zone and other countries agreed to provide him with a loan. However his real plans and consecutive actions stayed hidden to the eye of other people for a long time. By deceptive and misleading information he concealed from the public ruthless and egoistic building of his own large private estate, his personal exploitative monopoly.

Leopold's people began to visit local villages and presenting their chiefs with treaties which were not written in their language and therefore they did not understand them. Thanks to these treaties, indigenous people of Congo basically signed their land off to Leopold. In return they received clothes and all their land, all the fauna and flora in the area, all the resources now belonged to King Leopold. The flag of Congo now consisted of light star on dark background – the symbol of light of civilization in the darkness of Africa.

Without any consultation with indigenous people, The Congo Free State was established. In order to make profit, Leopold started to gather ivory – exotic and greatly expensive material. For this purpose, his army went on killing elephants in great number, or taking the tusks from the possession of villagers. Native people were

employed in forced labour. They were forced to work on building the railway that would transport Leopold's soldiers. Men were forced to break through the rocks without any special tools, moreover under extremely adverse conditions, and many of them died.

The first person, who visited this place of torture and abuse and actually tried to bring attention to its malice, was George Washington Williams. This American politician was shocked by what he saw in Congo and wrote an open letter to Leopold in which he described his big disappointment by how the natives are treated and how horrifying are the conditions under which they are forced to live. In his letter to Leopold, Williams states: *"When I arrived in the Congo, I naturally sought for the results of the brilliant programme: "fostering care", "benevolent enterprise", an "honest and practical effort" to increase the knowledge of the natives "and secure their welfare". (...) There has been, to my absolute knowledge, no "honest and practical effort made to increase their knowledge and secure their welfare. (...) Your Majesty's Government has sequestered their land, burned their towns, stolen their property, enslaved their women and children, and committed other crimes too numerous to mention in detail."*² He then states twelve charges against Leopold and his government.

The open letter was followed by a strong public dismay but the King dismissed all the charges without any difficulty and continued in his actions. He started to build armies consisting of native men and children that were used to fight against occasional rebellions. Some of them were successful in destroying the posts and killing some of the colonists, but the most of them were brutally suppressed.

With the rapid progress in development of electricity at the turn of the century, the demand for rubber significantly increased and it became a very valuable commodity. Natural resources of rubber latex were rich in Congo and since Leopold needed to repay his debt, the Congo Free State began to make a use of that. Collecting the rubber was more unpopular among the natives than any other type of labour. To transport the natural rubber from one place to another, the workers needed to spread the fluid material over their bare bodies and the subsequent peeling off was extremely painful.

² George Washington Williams, "An Open Letter to His Serene Majesty Leopold II, King of the Belgians and Sovereign of the Independent State of Congo By Colonel, The Honorable Geo. W. Williams, of the United States of America," (Wikisource), accessed August 3, 2014, http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/An_Open_Letter_to_His_Serene_Majesty_Leopold_II,_King_of_the_Belgians_and_Sovereign_of_the_Independent_State_of_Congo_By_Colonel,_The_Honorable_Geo._W._Williams_of_the_United_States_of_America.

When some of the workers were not collecting enough and did not meet the quotas, they were beaten, whipped and their hands were usually cut off.

Death toll of Leopold's colonialist tendencies was comparable to holocaust. Almost ten million people, half of the population of Congo, were killed. The horrors of Congo were not stopped after Leopold's death. The exploitation of the country was continued by Belgian government and although not as aggressive and brutal they are continued till today.³

³ Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2011)

II. Conrad's Life

Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, also known as Joseph Conrad, was born on 3 December 1857 to Evelina Bobrowska and Apollo Korzeniowski. Both of his parents were well educated and intellectual people, his father was highly interested in literature and had shown a decent poetic talent, which he developed in adult years and became the writer of decent reputation.

Conrad's family was of a Polish origin and he was born in the part of Ukraine that historically belonged to Poland. Conrad's father was one of the leading figures of nationalist movement of the country that was at that time yearning for liberation under the oppression of the Bolshevik Russia. It is very clear that since a very young age, Conrad was under influence of people fighting against oppressive tendencies of imperialistic nations and for liberty in the first place. When in Warsaw, Apollo was sent a letter from Conrad's grandmother, describing his son: *"There are no words to describe all the shades of goodness in this child. He is very friendly towards the poor, gives them news of the family and asks them to pray for the return of his father from Warsaw."*⁴

When Conrad was five years old, his father Apollo was arrested and deported to Vologda, Russia, and his wife decided to voluntarily join him in the exile, taking their little son with them. In Vologda, they lived in small colony of exiles, and were exposed to very difficult living conditions. These very early experiences might have helped to evolve the sense of empathy in Conrad for people who are destitute and who are exposed to the conditions that are not natural to them. He and his family suffered especially from homesickness and powerlessness in their desire to affect the fate of their country, which is again a partial parallel to the situation of the Africans. The difference is in awareness of something being wrong with the status quo and whereas Conrad's parents understood their situation and felt strong urge to fight back, characters in Conrad's stories are not fully aware of the wrongs committed against them.

For next few years, things were getting worse and worse for Korzeniowski family. Conrad's mother was suffering from heavy illness and mental deterioration and his father was forced to take care of the family matters. Evelina Korzeniowska died on April 6, 1865. Apollo, grieving about the death of his wife and devastated by worsening

⁴ Gerard Jean-Aubry, *The Sea Dreamer A Definitive Biography Of Joseph Conrad* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1957), 24. Accessed June 10, 2014, <http://www.archive.org/details/seadreameradefin007222mbp>.

political situation of his country, was unable to provide his son with required care and therefore Conrad, living in isolation, was seeking escape from depressing reality in reading a number of books that told the stories about faraway countries, where a man could be free. These unsurprisingly caught his attention and slowly began to light the fuse of travelling desires in young mind yearning for adventures. Same as Marlow, the character in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad pointed his finger to the location of Africa on map and said: “*When I grow up, I shall go there.*”⁵ His father let Conrad read books from his library and was also trying to educate him in the exile.

At the age of eleven, on May 23, 1868, Conrad became an orphan. On his father’s gravestone there were inscribed following words: “*To Apollo Nalecz Korzeniowski – Victim of Muscovite Tyranny*”.⁶ Little boy went under charge of his father’s friend, writer and publicist Stefan Buszczyński and started to attend a school.⁷ There he showed great interest in literature, history and geography, but other subjects which collided with his imaginative and adventurous nature were not very pleasant for him. More than participating in games with his schoolmates, he inclined to discussions with more sensible adults.

As he was getting older, his desire to experience true freedom and travel by the sea grew stronger, but because of staying in Poland he could not be much farther from dipping his toe in the salt water. Conrad’s dreams seemed childish to people in his surroundings and his tutor tried to persuade him to waive his plan to become seafarer. Conrad however refused to be swayed. After series of arguments his tutor had said to him: “*You are an incorrigible, hopeless Don Quixote. That’s what you are.*”⁸ In the age of seventeen, Conrad had left Poland for France in order to pursue his marine career.

He spent time in Marseilles, and thanks to his uncle’s connections there, Conrad, for the first time in his life, came into contact with sea water. Through the job that his uncle got him, he eventually became a crew member of the sailing ship. He has spent four years in France before moving to Britain and joining the British Merchant Service. During the following years and number of days spent at the sea, he was slowly making his way up in the sailing staff hierarchy, all the way to the rank of captain.

His premonition from childhood was about to become true in the April of 1889, as he was offered a job by Belgian merchant company which involved commanding old

⁵ Ibid., 153.

⁶ Ibid., 45.

⁷ Ibid., 46.

⁸ Ibid., 52.

steamboat and sail on the Congo River, the passage to the heart of Africa. And even after all the years being a seafarer, the experiences of Congo were about to stigmatize him for the rest of his life.

The story of Captain Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* is very much autobiographical. At the end of April, Captain Korzeniowski was suddenly promised to be put in charge of one of the steamboats on Congo River and in May, he has left Brussels to stay in Africa for three years. Soon after his arrival to the station, he had to confront the fact that the job circumstances were very different from what he has been told by the company officials and they have not been exactly sincere with him back in Brussels. He has soon discovered that only small percentage of employees lasted in the Congo setting more than a year. Conrad was shocked by the environment and people staying there. The entry from the diary that he kept in those days speaks for itself: *“Think just now that my life amongst the people (white) around here cannot be very comfortable. Intend avoid acquaintances as much as possible.”*⁹ He criticized the servility of his fellow employees and overall atmosphere of company’s station. What is the most striking thing about this diary entry is the fact that Conrad explicitly stated that he is annoyed by “white” people and it only proves the disappointment he must have gone through.

After few days he was forced to travel long distance by foot to the place, where he is supposed to find the steamboat he will command. With every day he grew sicker and sicker of the human encountering and hostile wilderness. This was even worsened by attacks of fever.

Following the long march, the caravan has finally arrived to the destination and Conrad boarded the ship. He participated in the mission of cruising up the river and relieving one of the company agents, who was in ill health. Although in contrast to what he was promised, he initially served only as the first mate. But on the way back he is asked to take over the command of the ship. However, Conrad grew strongly angry with Belgians and was spending a lot of time in solitude. Extreme conditions soon started to affect his mental and physical health. He wanted to tolerate these obstacles and wait till he becomes captain of steamboat Florida as promised, but the local manager was not very fond of Conrad a decided to keep him second-mate. Conrad was devastated by the malice of his co-workers and eventually decided to leave the place.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

He had never fully physically recovered from his African expedition and suffered from the after-effects till his death. These experiences without any doubt contributed to the overall atmosphere and heavy tone of *Heart of Darkness*, in which Conrad almost overwhelms the reader with his pessimistic view of the world as the place of darkness and the descriptions of the dark nature of humanity.¹⁰

¹⁰ *Joseph Conrad: A Brief Chronicle* (New York, Doubleday, Page & Co.)

III. Conrad's portrayal of Africans

Conrad is criticized by Achebe for his seemingly narrow-minded and preconceived portrayal of African people and Congo environment in general in *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe believes that Conrad's writings, among others, and its supporters and advocates may be partially blamed for deterioration of cultural and social awareness, and growth in European ignorance towards Africa. In his essay, Achebe states: "*Heart of Darkness projects the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality.*"¹¹ He says that Westerners feel the desire to demonstrate their superiority by directly comparing civilized parts of the world and Africa.

According to Achebe, Conrad portrays natives as mere wild beasts, brutes and savages, whose human features are shocking for the whites, as they think of African people more of as animals than human beings. In other words, natives are thought to be portrayed as immensely inferior creatures to the whites. He also has a problem with portrayal of Africa in general and frequent use of black colour and term "darkness" when speaking of it.

Conrad refers to the setting of the book – Africa – as "heart of darkness". Darkness and black colour in general are used by the author several times, but is it not a bit superficial to assume, that this would be based simply on the native's colour of skin or the alleged "evil spirit" of the continent? In my personal opinion, the title and these frequent utterances are based mainly on a mysterious atmosphere that surrounded the continent in the history. The mystery of something unknown, unexplored and from the essence of wilderness something dangerous. The frequent use of darkness also refers to "the sinister powers" of the wilderness and effects it may have on the colonists. It contributes to their mental corruption – they are prone to depression or aggression, as Marlow and Carlier and Kayerts are respectively. They are spending time in unknown, hostile environment and it can have bad effect on their mental health.

Conrad sometimes refers to African natives as "niggers", which is also a big part of Achebe's criticism as he states: "*Certainly Conrad had a problem with niggers. His inordinate love of that word itself should be of interest to psychoanalysts.*"¹² The term

¹¹ Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness," accessed July 19, 2014, <http://kirbyk.net/hod/image.of.africa.html> .

¹² Ibid.

“nigger” was originally created as neutral reference to black people, but in the course of 19th century it evolved into derogatory term, and it is nowadays widely considered to have racist connotations and to be highly inappropriate and vulgar.¹³ May the usage of the term reflect Conrad’s own feelings toward Africans? Not in my opinion. First of all, his choice of frame narrative for storytelling in *Heart of Darkness* can be a good sign of disclaiming some of the ideas as being his own and it certainly seems as a good tool of holding a mirror in front of the society. Conrad is in some of the passages of the book referring to natives as niggers, brutes and savages but this does not necessarily mean it is his own perception of Africans as being inferior or animal-like. In the second half of 19th century, slave trade and slave labour was common in European countries and until the colonial encounters with natives this was the only way of European interaction with African people. This is how they were perceived among Europeans. It is wrong but it was the reality and there was a notion of inferiority connected with the people of dark coloured skin.

Even though Conrad’s view of Africans might seem a bit constrained, due to the terms he uses to describe them, native characters in his books certainly cannot be designated as less important, weak or evil. In opposition to very uncomplimentary descriptions of the whites, the natives seem to be portrayed with definite admiration, some of these characters are complex and portrayed as people of purity and great capabilities. Moreover, there is often almost mystical beauty in the way Conrad describes their nature.

Makola, native character in Conrad’s short story *An Outpost of Progress*, is a true counterpart to the main white characters. Although he may seem to be simply tributary to the Director of the outpost and quietly doing his work without stepping up for his rights and beliefs, he is introduced in direct opposition to the white characters – Kayerts and Carlier - and shown in much better light. He is educated, diligent and capable of keeping the station in good order and although he is said to “despise the two white men”¹⁴, he still treats them with certain respect. On the other hand his counterparts are portrayed as lazy and greedy. Conrad shows the wisdom, purity and capability of Africans as they are accustomed to take a good care of themselves and get

¹³ Randall Kennedy, *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 4.

¹⁴ Joseph Conrad, “An Outpost of Progress” in *Tales of Unrest* (Project Gutenberg, 2006), accessed June 15, 2014, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1202/1202-h/1202-h.htm> .

a work done, whereas whites are naive and spoiled by the civilized world and struggle to even survive in the environment.

It is necessary to mention here, that Makola and tribesmen are not treated and referred to as equal by the characters of Carlier and Kayerts. There is a sense of great abomination towards the natives, in the way they are talked to and talked about, as is illustrated in the following utterance: "*Pah! Don't they stink! You, Makola! Take that herd over to the fetish...*"¹⁵ This however again feels like a mere reflection of the general perception of the Africans among the society rather than Conrad's own voice.

There is a group of natives in the station used for necessary works. They are not partially civilized as Makola is; they are in the very beginning of the process. They were taken from their habitat and brought into contact with the colonists – for the very first time they encounter people and things that are completely unknown to them and which they do not understand. This contact with the unknown has almost devastating effect on them as is described by Conrad: "*The rice rations served out by the Company did not agree with them, being a food unknown to their land, and to which they could not get used. Consequently they were unhealthy and miserable. (...) They did very little work, and had lost their splendid physique.*"¹⁶ Conrad implies that when native people become dependent on the products of civilization, like in this case food, it spoils them. This is an indication of deteriorative effect that civilization has on people who never have come to contact with it before. In case of people living in civilized world, there was a slow transformation which spanned over centuries and therefore did not evoke such a shock. It was a slow and gradual process, but in the case of this unexpected meeting of the two – civilization and wilderness, civilization seems to be highly disharmonious with the virgin land and its inhabitants.

The whites are told to have almost no control over those natives and this is the sign of the indomitability of the nature, even though there is illusive control over it, it is just question of time when will this force fly out of hand. The work for whites does not fulfil the natives; they do not do it because they want to. George Washington Williams addresses this question in his open letter: "*Instead of the natives of the Congo "adopting the fostering care" of your Majesty's Government, they everywhere complain that their land has been taken from them by force; that the Government is cruel and arbitrary,*

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

and declare that they neither love nor respect the Government and its flag.”¹⁷ Serving the whites did not make the natives happy, this was just a delusion used to pull the blindfold over white’s eyes, instrument to justify their actions in front of society, and of course justify it to themselves as well. The fact is that the natives were contractually bound, on the basis of misleading contracts that were signed by their villages.

The natives perceive the whites as something almost unearthly. In a bad way – something sinister that was invoked on their land, as Conrad notes: “*They were only mourning for those they had lost by the witchcraft of white men, who had brought wicked people into their country.*”¹⁸ They consider whites to be mysterious creatures; the chief of the neighbouring tribe named Gobila even believes that the whites are immortal. They are afraid of the whites from the same reasons as whites fear them. They are something unknown and potentially dangerous.

Character Gobila maintains good relationship with the two whites; he seems to be curious about them and provides them with food-stuff. This shows some possibility of co-existence and also one-way dependence. What Conrad indicates as really important here is the fact that the dependence only works non-reversibly. It is Carlier and Kayerts who are now detached from the civilization and are therefore dependent on the native tribe and natural resources. There is no way they would be able to provide themselves with food by hunting or gathering. The natives on the other hand are capable of hunting out their own food and in case of white’s disappearance their life would go on without any major change. We certainly can’t say that other way around.

When the natives are encountered by the narrator for the very first time in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad portrays them with a certain sense of curiosity, but also with a great admiration of their natural beauty: “*It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks—these chaps; but they*

¹⁷ George Washington Williams, “An Open Letter to His Serene Majesty Leopold II, King of the Belgians and Sovereign of the Independent State of Congo By Colonel, The Honorable Geo. W. Williams, of the United States of America” (Wikisource), accessed August 3, 2014, http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/An_Open_Letter_to_His_Serene_Majesty_Leopold_II,_King_of_the_Belgians_and_Sovereign_of_the_Independent_State_of_Congo_By_Colonel,_The_Honorable_Geo._W._Williams_of_the_United_States_of_America .

¹⁸ Joseph Conrad, “An Outpost of Progress” in *Tales of Unrest* (Project Gutenberg 2006), accessed June 15, 2014, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1202/1202-h/1202-h.htm> .

had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there."¹⁹ He seems to be almost fascinated with their physique and nature. There is also visible the vast difference between his descriptions of the natives in their natural habitat and the ones that came to touch with the colonists. The exact same thing applies to his descriptions of African nature: "*..the silence of the land went home to one's very heart—its mystery, its greatness, the amazing reality of its concealed life.*"²⁰ The nature seems to be something fascinating to Conrad, something elusive that is worth exploring, but something that should be approached with respect.

In the passage preceding the quotation from previous article, Conrad is describing how he feels alone within his fellow sailors as a passenger on the steamboat, and he describes the voice of the surf as his only pleasure: "*The voice of the surf heard now and then was a positive pleasure, like the speech of a brother. It was something natural, that had its reason, that had a meaning.*"²¹ Previous comparing of the natives to the surf appears to be very interesting - it seems like the nature really speaks to the narrator and it is very close to him. He expresses fascination, and at the same time some kind of consonance with the natural order, and with the freedom and naturalism of the native men. On the other hand, he feels really out of place among other civilized men.

After his arrival to the station, the narrator illustrates extremely harsh conditions under which the natives are forced to work. This is of course based on real conditions that Conrad observed during his own travels and these conditions are also described in Williams' open letter: "*They eat their rice twice a day by the use of their fingers; they often thirst for water when the season is dry; they are exposed to the heat and rain, and sleep upon the damp and filthy decks of the vessels often so closely crowded as to lie in human ordure. And, of course, many die.*"²² In one of many powerful passages Conrad describes a group of natives who are exhausted from the work and are seeking shelter

¹⁹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Project Gutenberg, 2006), accessed June 11, 2014, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/219/219-h/219-h.htm> .

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² George Washington Williams, "An Open Letter to His Serene Majesty Leopold II, King of the Belgians and Sovereign of the Independent State of Congo By Colonel, The Honorable Geo. W. Williams, of the United States of America" (Wikisource), accessed August 3, 2014, http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/An_Open_Letter_to_His_Serene_Majesty_Leopold_II,_King_of_the_Belgians_and_Sovereign_of_the_Independent_State_of_Congo_By_Colonel,_The_Honorable_Geo._W._Williams_of_the_United_States_of_America .

from the sun in the shadows of the trees. These men are on the cusp of death: “*They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom.*”²³ This again shows the destructive effects civilization has on the natives. They are exploited; the machinery chews them and spits them out not far from death. In the end they crawl to the shadow to die like an old dog crawls under the veranda for the same purpose. Conrad then notes that the work must proceed no matter what: “*The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.*”²⁴ The work around the dying natives is continuing as these are only small casualties in a pursuit of “higher purpose”²⁵.

In summary, it is possible to say that the native characters in Conrad’s *An Outpost of Progress* and *Heart of Darkness* are depicted in three ways. In first case, there are characters that are in the process of being civilized or are already partially civilized as for example Makola. The whites are condemning the natives’ savagery and their alleged mission is to civilize them, yet even if a native is civilized as Makola is, he is still treated with abomination and sense of inferiority. Conrad indicates the falsity of white’s mission and its true purpose being completely different. Some of the seemingly stereotypical characteristics of natives and Conrad’s choice of vocabulary are in my opinion not reflecting Conrad’s own opinions and racist tendencies, but is in fact reflection of general perception of society. As for Conrad’s usage of the word “nigger”, Professor of Anthropology Candice Bradley from Lawrence University insightfully observes: “*Most of the times that Marlow uses the word nigger, it is when an African has been physically abused by somebody else, when the African has already been completely and totally dehumanized. Otherwise Marlow uses Negro, or Black.*”²⁶

In second case, there is a great number of minor native characters that are exploited by the whites – they are beaten, used for hard work and killed on the basis of affectation. Conrad seems to be largely critical to this exploitation and his shocking descriptions succeed to draw compassion to the cruelly treated natives. Conrad also

²³ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Project Gutenberg, 2006), accessed June 11, 2014, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/219/219-h/219-h.htm>

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Candice Bradley, “Africa and Africans in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*,” (A Lawrence University Freshman Studies Lecture, 1996), accessed August 5, 2014, <http://mural.uv.es/estferde/heart.html> .

points out that contact with products of civilization has destructive effect on natives, as for example food given to them by colonists worsens their health.

Thirdly, there are free native characters that are described by Conrad with great sense of admiration of their physique and nature.

IV. Conrad's portrayal of colonists and critique of imperialism

Colonists in Conrad's stories perceive themselves as "emissaries of light"²⁷ – the great civilized human beings bringing the torch of wisdom and progress to the continent of brutes. This is of course based on true circumstances as Congo Free State was believed to be humanitarian project and the colonists were thought to have come to educate indigenous people of Africa and "secure their welfare".²⁸ Instead the natives were exploited, humiliated and used for hard work under inhuman conditions. Even if the alleged mission would have been true and its purpose would have been purely philanthropic, the question is whether this kind of enlightenment was something the natives wanted or needed.

Conrad seems to be critical not only about imperialism, but about status of society in general. Colonialism went hand in hand with globalization – thanks to the wider possibilities of travel and shipping the commodities from farther distances, the world was experiencing a boom in trade and commodities became more available for people. Rare expensive natural resources like ivory or diamonds were shipped to European countries from destinations like Africa and India, and in opposite direction other common goods were shipped. The population was growing, thanks to industrial revolution the migration was more accessible and people were moving to growing cities. All these factors resulted in society's indulgence.

Let me take a look at two protagonists of *An Outpost of Progress* – Kayerts and Carlier. The two men who are in charge of the station may be considered to be a true representation of the members of civilized society. Compared to the character description of Makola, the descriptions of Kayerts and Carlier appear to be very cold, reserved and almost grotesque. Conrad describes them as follows: "*Kayerts, the chief, was short and fat; Carlier, the assistant, was tall, with a large head and a very broad trunk perched upon a long pair of thin legs.*"²⁹ The Director of the station himself does not have a high opinion of the two as to him they appear to be unskilled and unable to

²⁷ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Project Gutenberg, 2006), accessed June 11, 2014, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/219/219-h/219-h.htm>

²⁸ George Washington Williams, "An Open Letter to His Serene Majesty Leopold II, King of the Belgians and Sovereign of the Independent State of Congo By Colonel, The Honorable Geo. W. Williams, of the United States of America" (Wikisource), accessed August 3, 2014, http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/An_Open_Letter_to_His_Serene_Majesty_Leopold_II,_King_of_the_Belgians_and_Sovereign_of_the_Independent_State_of_Congo_By_Colonel,_The_Honorable_Geo._W._Williams_of_the_United_States_of_America .

²⁹ Joseph Conrad, "An Outpost of Progress" in *Tales of Unrest* (Project Gutenberg 2006), accessed June 15, 2014, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1202/1202-h/1202-h.htm>

take a good care of themselves, and certainly not to take care of the station. Conrad continues their description through the eyes of the Director: “*Look at those two imbeciles. They must be mad at home to send me such specimens. I told those fellows to plant a vegetable garden, build new storehouses and fences, and construct a landing-stage. I bet nothing will be done! They won't know how to begin. I always thought the station on this river useless, and they just fit the station!*”³⁰ They do not care about anyone else; their personal goal is to make some money in the easiest way possible. Since they are not under any supervision at the station they can just lazily kill time, argue about who is really in charge of the station and wait for the money to fall into their pockets. What is shocking is the fact that this passivity still makes them feel good about themselves: “*Together they did nothing, absolutely nothing, and enjoyed the sense of the idleness for which they were paid.*”³¹ By this statement Conrad in my opinion points out nuisance of the society in general. Everybody aspires to be wealthy and respectable, but each would prefer to skip a journey that leads to it.

They are blinded with the vision of profit. Even if there are doubtful conditions surrounding the deal with natives, they fail to spot the danger and naively proceed with the trade. It seems like when Makola uses the word ivory in front of them, it is all they are able to see. This seems to ring true in *Heart of Darkness* as well. All the men in the station can think about is ivory and the profit it would bring. This craving for ivory grows almost into obsession. Conrad describes this obsession as follows: “*The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it. A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse.*”³² To colonists ivory symbolizes money and power that comes with it and they want to gather as much as they can. Thanks to this and their greed, the relationships within the stations are full of intrigues and hypocrisy: “*They intrigued and slandered and hated each other only on that account—but as to effectually lifting a little finger—oh, no.*”³³ It is the side effect of the civilized upbringing – everyone feels the need to get to the higher position, to climb the social ladder, to become wealthy, and hand in hand with this goes a certain amount of paranoia - feeling that everyone is a rival and fear of being surpassed and left behind.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Project Gutenberg, 2006), accessed June 11, 2014, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/219/219-h/219-h.htm>

³³ Ibid.

Conrad then continues and elaborates on the idea of civilization being responsible for Kayerts and Carlier's incompetence and frivolousness. They had been brought up in the environment which took a good care of them and they are not prepared, physically nor mentally, for these hostile conditions. Until now they were not required to be self-sufficient individuals, to think on their own, or to make important decisions in the matter of life and death. Conrad criticizes this nuisance in following way: "*Society, not from any tenderness, but because of its strange needs, had taken care of those two men, forbidding them all independent thought, all initiative, all departure from routine; and forbidding it under pain of death.(...) The courage, the composure, the confidence; the emotions and principles; every great and every insignificant thought belongs not to the individual but to the crowd: to the crowd that believes blindly in the irresistible force of its institutions and of its morals, in the power of its police and of its opinion.*"³⁴ He implies that society satisfied their every need and fed them with ideas, goals and opinions in order to make them abiding members of the herd. Conrad implies that all their thoughts, ideals and dreams are not their own, but they are shared by the most of the society members as the result of long-running process of fostering.

As soon as the Director with his steamboat sails away, the gloom and peril of the surrounding wilderness weighs down on the two men and they realize that for the very first time they are alone in the wild and there is no extended hand of the civilization that would protect them. Now they are like two children whose mother suddenly disappeared and they need to count only on themselves and no one other. They feel helpless and Conrad comments on their impotency as follows: "*Few men realize that their life, the very essence of their character, their capabilities and their audacities, are only the expression of their belief in the safety of their surroundings.*"³⁵ Conrad observes that without civilization and its protective wings, being civilized human being means nothing – all its courage and confidence is just an extension of being a part of something bigger.

The two are ignorant to the surrounding world; they are "*aware only of what came in contact with them (and of that only imperfectly), but unable to see the general*

³⁴ Joseph Conrad, "An Outpost of Progress" in *Tales of Unrest* (Project Gutenberg 2006), accessed June 15, 2014, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1202/1202-h/1202-h.htm>

³⁵ Ibid.

aspect of things."³⁶ They are only able to pay attention to the things not exceeding their own door-step and the world around them they take for granted. When it comes to the encounters with wild natives there is almost child-like amazement in their reaction: "*Here, look! look at that fellow there--and that other one, to the left. Did you ever such a face? Oh, the funny brute!*"³⁷ The way Conrad depicts this situation reminds me of seeing children visiting ZOO for the very first time – it shows signs of primitivism, puerility and naive ignorance.

During their encounter with the group of members of unknown tribe, Karlier and Cayerts consider those men being dangerous because of the fact that the men are in possession of firearms. The interesting thing is that the natives could by no means manufacture those firearms themselves, these must have been given to them by other civilized men. So the power for which they are considered to be dangerous was initially given to them by colonists, what colonist fear is the creation of their own.

The two white men despise the natives, consider them being inferior and they think of them as being more close to animals than human beings. With reference to their uncivilized style of living, they automatically assume that the natives are not worthy of being treated as equal. The interesting thing is that this notion of inferiority fabricated by civilized people is not based on factual signs of being worse in some of the aspects of life itself or based on having some bad qualities, but it is based simply on the fact of being different from them. It is the very first sentence in Benjamin Franklin's *Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America* which is truthful to this more than anything else. Franklin states: "*SAVAGES we call them, because their manners differ from ours, which we think the perfection of civility; they think the same of theirs.*"³⁸ There is the difference in language spoken, colour of the skin and overall style of living – but when compared with respect to the ability to survive, diligence, loyalty, sense of responsibility; considering these basic human qualities, the natives would be probably considered as being better human beings.

When the two hear the language of natives, they mock it as being some kind of gibberish that they have never heard before, but yet there is something slightly familiar to them in that language and Conrad describes it as follows: "*It was like a reminiscence*

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Benjamin Franklin, "Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America" in *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: The Perkins Book Company, 1902), 246. Accessed July 20, 2014, <http://www.archive.org/details/autobiographyofb05fran> .

of something not exactly familiar, and yet resembling the speech of civilized men. It sounded like one of those impossible languages which sometimes we hear in our dreams."³⁹ From this passage it seems like the whites are aware of unquestionable similarities between them and the natives, but they are simply suppressing the possibility of those similarities being real in their minds. Conrad elaborates on the same topic in *Heart of Darkness* and describes this feeling in a following way: "*...what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend.*"⁴⁰ Conrad implies that only a thought of those similarities is scary to them and they refuse to admit them. This is reminiscent of Aryanism which basically stood on the same principle – one race perversely believing to be superior to the others.

Only thing that keeps Kayerts and Carlier alive is the thought of steamboat coming back for them in a few months. When the station is cut of the contact with the native village and their supplies begin to reduce rapidly, Carlier and Kayerts make an attempt to provide themselves with food, but these attempts are unsuccessful. They are not skilled enough and do not have needed experience to hunt properly. This results in extreme frustration and they eventually start to turn their aggression against natives: "*Carlier had a fit of rage over it and talked about the necessity of exterminating all the niggers before the country could be made habitable.*"⁴¹ It shows how whites absolutely exclude the possibility of co-habitation with native people and are willing to go over dead bodies in order to achieve their goals. The natives are considered to be almost inhuman obstacle, something that should be got rid of.

The mental deterioration of the two whites is not caused by the direct influence of wilderness itself, the wilderness only starts to proof their incapability and naivety – they start to suffer because of their own unpreparedness. If they would be compelled to

³⁹ Joseph Conrad, "An Outpost of Progress" in *Tales of Unrest* (Project Gutenberg 2006), accessed June 15, 2014, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1202/1202-h/1202-h.htm>

⁴⁰ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Project Gutenberg, 2006), accessed June 11, 2014, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/219/219-h/219-h.htm>

⁴¹ Joseph Conrad, "An Outpost of Progress" in *Tales of Unrest* (Project Gutenberg 2006), accessed June 15, 2014, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1202/1202-h/1202-h.htm>

endure under the same circumstances on any other place on Earth, their mental state would worsen the same way. The incidence of African environment itself has no effect on the deterioration of colonists', it only awakens and enhances the darkness hidden within themselves, darkness which dwells within the human and springs in a form of madness from the nature of civilized human being. Their only touch with civilization being late, they become obsessed with the steamer coming back, they start not to get along with each other and eventually they behave aggressively against each other. They realize that they do not really know much about each other and there is a similar feeling like the one with the natives – they become paranoid of each other and fearing each other. This madness and paranoia eventually results in Kayerts killing Carrier.

The framing story of *Heart of Darkness* begins on the steamboat anchored on the river Thames. From the very beginning, Conrad seems to be again implying the bad nature of civilized world, as he describes the nearby city as “monstrous”⁴² with “brooding gloom”⁴³ lingering over it, as if there was some sinister aura surrounding it in the light of the setting sun. Reader is slowly made to think of manmade town as something evil, something veiled in darkness - place of vice and moral decay. Place where the seamen return from their journeys only to drink and visit brothels. Place so invariable, predictable and stunted, that one can see all its characteristics by spending a hour on its outskirts: “...after his hours of work, a casual stroll or a casual spree on shore suffices to unfold for him the secret of a whole continent, and generally he finds the secret not worth knowing.”⁴⁴ Marlow also points out that in the past, this place was also the place of darkness and by this statement indicates that their ancestors also might have been considered to be savages.

When Marlow visits the headquarters of the trading company he describes the building to be somehow unsettling as if he was being drawn into something sinister. There are two women sitting next to the entrance knitting black wool. They are said to be “guarding the door of Darkness”.⁴⁵ From the descriptions of the two women it seems that Conrad is referencing the Fates from Greek mythology who spanned,

⁴² Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Project Gutenberg, 2006), accessed June 11, 2014, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/219/219-h/219-h.htm>

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

measured and cut the thread of life for every living person.⁴⁶ This mystical encounter from the book may be allegorical parallel to Conrad's own life as he may perceive the entering the company to be fateful event of his life.

The novel is after all partially autobiographical and in one part Conrad describes him being a young boy and his admiring observations of maps. He dreamt about exploring the "blank places"⁴⁷ on the map that are full of mystery. Since his boyhood these blank places disappeared from the map, they are now filled "with rivers and lakes and names"⁴⁸ and they lost the enchantment of being mysterious. As these places are explored and being slowly infected by civilization they lose their glamour and they're being swallowed by darkness. Conrad goes on and states that from the beginning of time, colonization was an act of mere exploitation and colonists were only "conquerors". He states: "...*your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others.*"⁴⁹ He denominates colonization as an ostentatious manifestation of one's assumed superiority by using of a "brute force."⁵⁰

This shows the true characteristics of civilized society. More the man has, more he wants. He is acquisitive. He is craving for power and wealth. He wants to have control and in order to get to it he uses the weaknesses of others. Colonists are just people who are using force to achieve their materialistic goals, as is implied by Conrad: "*They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind...*"⁵¹ He also implies that these acts are often sheltered with the illusion of idea of greater good.

It seems to me that in several cases when the narrator speaks about participating in this seeming noble mission, these passages show signs of irony, as for example in the passage where Marlow is for the first time appointed to be in charge of the steamer: "*It appeared, however, I was also one of the Workers, with a capital-- you know. Something like an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle.*"⁵² The subtle pungency of this utterance suggests a slightly humorous attack Conrad is taking

⁴⁶ "The Fates," GreekMythology.com, accessed August 5, 2014, http://www.greekmythology.com/Other_Gods/The_Fates/the_fates.html

⁴⁷ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Project Gutenberg, 2006), accessed June 11, 2014, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/219/219-h/219-h.htm>

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

on a presumed grandeur of the colonial troopers. Irony is after all one of Conrad's trademarks and something he is among others known for. Richard Curle in his book *Joseph Conrad: A Study* states: "*Conrad's humour, at its easiest, has the keenness of a blade without its deadly suggestion. It is, in truth, simply a sense of humour dyed, instinctively, with the colour of Conrad's unusual and always slightly ironical personality.*"⁵³

Conrad indicates that the imperialistic actions are perceived as something positive within the society members. They think of the natives as savages who need to be civilized in order to reform. There is a woman Marlow encounters who speaks about the need of "*weaning those ignorant millions from their horrid ways*".⁵⁴ Not only the people are disillusioned by the fact of the natives needing some kind of reformation, the reformation is not the goal of colonist in the first place. Conrad criticizes the materialism and consumerism rooted in the society and as he himself has visited Congo, he indicates that the fostering care is the last reason for colonialists for visiting these remote places. "*To tear treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe.*"⁵⁵ He compares the natives to criminals, for these trading companies and corporations it is all about money. Their real goal is to use the natives to get to precious resources and make a profit by shipping them back to Europe and selling them.

There is a character named Fresleven mentioned in *Heart of Darkness*, he is described as one of the calmest people in the world, yet he once loses his temper and beats one of the natives almost to death: "*Fresleven was the gentlest, quietest creature that ever walked on two legs.(...) ...he probably felt the need at last of asserting his self-respect in some way. Therefore he whacked the old nigger mercilessly.*"⁵⁶ He beats him just to increase his self-confidence, to harden his position. This indicates how whites treat the natives as objects, something they can use for work or something they can put the blame on. In several passages, including the one with firing cannons mentioned later, Conrad suggests that this colony is for whites something like amusement park or

⁵³ Richard Curle, *Joseph Conrad: A Study* (New York, Doubleday, Page & Co., 1914), 173. Accessed July 20, 2014, <http://www.archive.org/details/josephconradstud00curl> .

⁵⁴ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Project Gutenberg, 2006), accessed June 11, 2014, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/219/219-h/219-h.htm>

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

hunting range - a place where they can enjoy themselves while the work is done for them by somebody else.

When Fresleven is killed by the sparrow, the people of the whole native village leave their homes in fear of revenge. They consider the man somehow sacred and probably are scared of fear of Gods that would bring mayhem on their village. Conrad implies this when suddenly the villagers all escape: "*The supernatural being had not been touched after he fell. And the village was deserted, the huts gaped black, rotting, all askew within the fallen enclosures. A calamity had come to it, sure enough. The people had vanished.*"⁵⁷ It is of course is vast contrast with colonialists who feel no remorse with the natives and go over the dead bodies, nothing is sacred to them and there is no fear of consequences.

There is a tradesman in the station who pronounces the statement: "*'Men who come out here should have no entrails.'* He sealed the utterance with that smile of his, as though it had been a door opening into a darkness he had in his keeping."⁵⁸ This again seems to be symbolizing the imperialism in general. The colonists who are being a part of exploitation should have no conscience; they serve the alleged greater purpose and should not mind the casualties. There is no place for empathy or compassion. Nowadays it could be considered the parallel to the Second World War and it reminded me of the book I have read recently called *La mort est mon metier* written by Robert Merle. It depicts the life of Rudolf Höss, German officer in charge of concentration camp in Auschwitz. The main character of the book is blamed for killing millions of Jews, yet he argues that he feels no compassion and guilt since he was only following the orders. The same repression of moral values is needed in the case of imperialism too.

When the narrator visits the station, he also meets a white man, a book-keeper, who is dressed very neatly, all in white. Conrad describes this man as something that does not quite fit in the environment and seems unnatural being there: "*His appearance was certainly that of a hairdresser's dummy; but in the great demoralization of the land he kept up his appearance.*"⁵⁹ This character, which does not occur further in the novel, may in my opinion symbolize what I have described in chapter dedicated to historical

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Project Gutenberg, 2006), accessed June 11, 2014, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/219/219-h/219-h.htm>

background – the colonists always hid their actions behind the illusion of some noble purpose. There was always some kind of misleading aura surrounding their acts and the true notion was hidden to the society. This character seems to be allegory for the imperialism in general. He is a part of this cruel unethical machinery, yet has a feeling to dress nicely and respectably.

The notion of not belonging to African environment applies to all the colonists in general - they obstruct the natural flow of things and take negative and intrusive effect on native people and their habitat. He describes the man-made station being in total chaos and there is a great contrast with the natural order of the jungle. Conrad also uses coast and surf as symbols to support this contrast. Coast being virgin land and surf being entering passage for the evil from overseas, Conrad describes the boundary between the two as the borderline between right and wrong. Border that causes friction: “...all along the formless coast bordered by dangerous surf, as if Nature herself had tried to ward off intruders.”⁶⁰

Conrad describes the behaviour of the colonist as something unreasonable and full of madness. They are causing unnecessary havoc in the virgin land as they are devastating nature that is not even restraining them from their primer intentions and they are firing the cannons on imaginary enemies hidden in the jungle without actually aiming. Conrad points out that their actions bear a signs of absurdity: “*There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight.*”⁶¹ He also states that it is absurd to call the natives criminals and enemies when they did nothing wrong.

When Captain Marlow visits the shed belonging to one of the agents - he notices the oil painting on the wall which depicts blindfolded woman on the black background with the lighted torch in her hand. By this subtle symbol Conrad addresses the ignorance of the colonists as they are blinded with sense of their superiority and Africa’s alleged need for reformation. It is revealed that the picture was painted by Kurtz, who is described as very intelligent, morally sophisticated man and is supposed to be one of the leading figures of their mission. Based on the painting Conrad indicates that it is Kurtz who sees the true nature of devastation Europeans are bringing upon this land.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Conrad surprisingly seems to be implying that the invasion is not everlasting but only temporary: “*And outside, the silent wilderness surrounding this cleared speck on the earth struck me as something great and invincible, like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion.*”⁶² As if the nature was only waiting to claim this land its own again in a short period of time. This notion is again supported when there is a fire of a shed described as: “*..burst into a blaze so suddenly that you would have thought the earth had opened to let an avenging fire consume all that trash.*”⁶³ Conrad’s fascination with the natural forces and nature’s ability to establish order again is noticeable several times throughout a novel, for instance when Marlow and others embark on the journey to find Kurtz and sail up the river. He describes something mysterious about the jungle surrounding the river, almost a tangible force that is lying in wait to “*topple over the creek, to sweep every little man of us out of his little existence.*”⁶⁴ Conrad’s descriptions of nature, as the steamboat penetrates deeper into the heart of the continent, seem to be more and more mystical and almost nostalgic as it feels like going back through time. To the time when this land was living its own life without the intruders devastating its beauties.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

V. Other authors and imperialism

Joseph Conrad is certainly not the only writer who ever included the topic of colonialism in his writings. Together with number of non-fictional and history books, there are several major classic writers who also touched on the topic in their writings and presented their own view of imperialism. I will be considering E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958).

E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*

Forster's novel is set in the British colony in India in 1920s and explores the question of coexistence of the colonists and natives and whether harmonious cohabitation is even possible. He explores the themes of prejudice against the natives and corruption of their basic human rights. Compared to Congo, there is a big difference in the treatment of indigenous people as there is a great progress in elimination of the cruelty towards them and attempts of equality within this kind of miscellaneous intercommunity may be considered partially successful. Yet Forster cautions that in case of a problem or crisis, these preconceptions towards natives prove to be never fully purged and are deeply rooted in the colonists' mindsets.⁶⁵

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Achebe's insight on the topic of imperialism is unique in the fact that its main character is one of the indigenous people and reader follows his life in one of the native villages. Achebe describes in detail natives' living conditions, their rituals, habits, religion and relationships. Thanks to this insight reader might be shocked by orthodoxy with which natives obey their religion and atrocity and intransigence this might bring. Achebe then describes the coming of colonists and their religious missionaries. He explores the clash between two different ideologies and how the colonists slowly infect the relationships within the village which eventually causes deterioration and complete disruption.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (New York: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1994)

⁶⁶ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London, Penguin Books, 2006)

Conclusion

There have been a number of books written using a colonial land as a setting and its habitants as characters, yet touching on the topic of colonialism somehow lightly. Conrad's work is in my opinion unique in its sincerity, intransigence and aggression with which it tackles the topic as he describes the horrors of colonized lands without any embellishment and is uncompromising in his critique towards imperial powers and ignorance of society in general. Although it might seem that the terms which Conrad uses to refer to the natives are derogatory, these utterances do not in my opinion reflect his own views but do reflect views of society in general. Conrad is highly critical to the brutality, arrogance and lack of respect with which colonists invaded the virgin land of Africa. He seems to be condemning to the dishonesty and deception that surrounds their acts and he considers the whole ideology being wrong. He also attributes the roots of this problem to the way society fosters its inmates.

Conrad, thanks to his experiences from childhood and his later travels to Africa, shows great sensitivity to the matter and is capable of great amount of compassion with the people suffering from deprivation of basic human rights. He pities the devastating effect the colonists have on the land and its habitants and is observant to the intrusion of the natural order. He points out that there is a great disharmony between the evolving civilization and nature and this disharmony results in mutual devastation. On several occasions he expresses a great amount of fascination with taintless natives and admires their wild yet unaccountably beautiful nature.

Conrad's work cannot be denied a certain amount of timelessness as it is drawing attention to the problems that are re-occurring throughout the history and are still relevant nowadays. There are still more than hundred isolated tribes living in the tropical forests nowadays and their natural habitat begins to be affected negatively by civilization. Also, it is impossible not to see parallels between the events Conrad describes in his works and for example National Socialism in Germany and extermination of the Jews.

To accuse Conrad of being racist and assign him part of the responsibility for ignorance towards African culture now seems slightly out of place as, when considering other accounts of Congo Free State horrors, his depiction of local affairs seem to be very authentic. Conrad's attempts to highlight these problems in his writings are in my opinion extremely valuable as literature is one of the means to spread ideas across

generations and it was after all Conrad's work that made me aware of the problem of imperialism and made me interested in the topic.

Resumé

Cílem této bakalářské práce bylo na základě rozboru dvou děl spisovatele Josepha Conrada a uvedením autorova díla do souvislosti s jeho vlastním životem oponovat názoru, že by některé elementy jeho díla měly být rasisticky motivovány. Nigerijský spisovatel Chinua Achebe v jedné ze svých esejí osočuje Conrada z rasismu a jeho dílo má být částečně vinno tím, jak západní společnost v dnešní době vnímá africkou kulturu a historii.

Důkazy o pravém opaku se dle mého názoru nacházejí přímo v Conradově životě a díle. Autor sám v mládí trpěl pod tyranskou vládou Bolševického Ruska a v rané dospělosti strávil několik měsíců přímo v kolonizovaném Kongu. A tyto zážitky měly velký dopad na jeho psychické zdraví a zrcadlí se koneckonců i v jeho psaných dílech. Conrad je nesmírně kritický nejen k vykořisťovatelským činům kolonistů, ale odsuzuje směr, jakým se ubírá vývoj společnosti obecně. Záměrem analýzy díla bylo podložit autorovu kritiku imperialismu konkrétními ukázkami a porovnáním s dílem jiných autorů poukázat na ojedinělost a nekompromisnost s jakou autor kritizuje problémy spojené s budováním kolonií a utlačováním domorodců v Africe.

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Anotace

Příjmení a jméno: Pekař Josef

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Název práce: Anti-imperialismus v díle Josepha Conrada

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Klíčová slova: Joseph Conrad, anti-imperialismus, kolonialismus, Afrika, rasismus

Abstrakt: Bakalářská práce se zabývá dílem spisovatele Josepha Conrada, konkrétně pak jeho krátkou povídkou *Bašta pokroku* a románem *Srdce temnoty*. Autor se ve svých dílech často dotýká tématu imperialismu, ke kterému bývá značně kritický. Tato bakalářské zkoumá známky anti-imperialismu zakotvené v Conradově díle a hledá motivaci k této jeho kritičnosti v autorově vlastním životě.

Annotation

Author: Pekař Josef

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Abstract: This bachelor thesis is concerned with the work of the writer Joseph Conrad, specifically his short story *An Outpost of Progress* and novel *Heart of Darkness*. The author in his work often touches on the topic of imperialism to which he is very critical. This bachelor thesis examines the signs of anti-imperialism harboured in Conrad's work and searches for motivation for his criticism in author's own life.