Outpost of Progress Study Guide

Outpost of Progress by Joseph Conrad

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Plot Summary

This book is both a psychological thriller and a political statement. Written in 1896, Joseph Conrad gives an account of two white traders, Carlier and Kayerts, who are out-posted in Africa at a trading station. Although the Europeans do trade goods, their underlying purpose is to export "civilization," from Europe to Africa. Carlier and Kayerts are living in colonial times. England and other European countries have control over Africa. The native people are seen as in need of being civilized.

As the steamer that drops them off fades into the distance, Carlier and Kayerts already begin to feel uneasy. Out in the jungle with no other Europeans to support their views about the world, they sense that they are out of their element, and not up to the task they have been assigned. Their predecessor lies buried at the foot of a crooked cross, having died of a fever. Makola is their native comrade. He is acting as the foreman for ten other natives who jump each morning when the white men ring a bell. These people are not from the immediate area, but are living as imported, miserable, and sick employees.

The belief systems, morals and internal world that Carlier and Kayerts brought with them from England are disintegrating in the isolation of the station. Without the support of the norms and expectations of their culture, they are free-falling in terms of their knowledge of what is right and wrong. Typical colonial Europeans, they are unable to appreciate the land and the culture that surrounds them. They are incapable of perceiving that non-European cultures have value and structure of their own.

Another native, Gobila, comes from a neighboring village. He is imposing his culture's worldview on the Europeans, and cannot see them as they are. In his mind, Carlier and Kayerts are immortal beings. Gobila is waiting to see how their immortality will manifest itself. Meanwhile, he is sending the women of his village to care for and bring food to the white men.

A group of armed natives arrives in camp and begin to make demands. Carlier and Kayerts are basically helpless. The two white men load their revolvers for the first time. That night the forest is full of drumming and yelling. This group of natives state they have more ivory than they can carry, which is of great interest to Carlier and Kayerts, who have yet to make any good trades. Makola offers to secure some ivory and the men agree.

During the night, Carlier and Kayerts hear gunshots. In the morning, they discover all of the native employees have disappeared. One of Gobila's men is dead. Makola tells them he traded the men for ivory. Carlier and Kayerts are angry and upset that their morals have been directly challenged; however, after their initial protest, they quickly rationalize their position. They blame the natives and the country, calling them strange, and decide the ivory will make their director happy.

The men are overwhelmed by their own emptiness. They are unable to describe what they are feeling, but they know they've changed, and not for the better. They are descending into confusion, fear and loathing. Sparked by an argument over sugar, Carlier gives way to his emotions, calling Kayerts a "slave-dealer." Kayerts is unable to accept the truth and responds violently. The two men begin chasing each other around the exterior of their house. Finally, Kayerts shoots Carlier dead.

Kayerts has lost his mind. Makola finds him sitting with the dead Carlier, and points out that Kayerts has just killed an unarmed man. Kayerts disintegrates into a belief that Carlier was just a "noxious beast," and then begins crying out to God for help. The book ends with the Managing Director of the steamship coming through the fog only to see that Kayerts is hanging dead on the cross, having stepped off the burial mound of his predecessor. Conrad leaves us with one final impression: Kayerts' tongue is sticking out.

Chapter 1 Summary

The story takes place in Africa during the time it was colonized by Europeans. The actual date of the events is not included, but one can surmise from the date of publication that it is sometime in the late 1800's. Carlier and Kayerts, two white men, are dropped off at the trading post by a steamboat. They live in a house, built of reeds with a verandah on all sides, which sits in a clearing in the jungle. A native man named Makola lives with his wife and three children, in a hut nearby. Beyond the houses is the grave of a painter who ran the trading post before he died of a fever. Over this grave is a crooked cross.

Kayerts and Carlier do not know how to run a trading post, or even how to live anywhere except in their own country. Kayerts was an employee with the telegraph company, and Carlier had been in a protected branch of the army where he had never seen any combat.

Kayerts has taken this position in order to provide a dowry for his daughter who is being brought up by his sisters. Both men are lazy and unproductive. They sit on their veranda and spent their time talking, smoking and reading, expecting that valuable goods will just appear on their doorstep, brought by the native people. One tribe does appear, and Makola bargains for hours to secure an elephant tusk. Carlier and Kayerts watch the proceedings and make fun of the native people's appearance and language.

Gobila, a native man, visits from a nearby village. He believes the white men are immortals. He sends the women of his village to the Europeans to provide food and palm wine. When the men are sick, the native women nurse them back to health. After five months of living this way, a group of armed natives emerges from the forest. They are strangers to the people in this part of the country. Makola seems afraid of them, and summons his wife to talk with them. The interchange between Mrs. Makola and the group of men is loud and animated. Kayerts and Carlier are scared and begin loading their revolvers. The strangers leave, but Mrs. Makola seems very agitated. Carlier and Kayerts cannot get any information about what is going on from Mr. Makola. That night,

they are disturbed by drumming coming from the villages. They think they hear shots fired. In the morning, all of the natives seem very upset about something. Fifteen canoes have crossed the river, something that is highly unusual. Makola is acting strangely. Carlier and Kayerts resolve to keep close to each other.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Kayerts and Carlier are so bound by their own European culture, they cannot see the value and structure of the native culture around them. They continuously stand apart from the native people, and see themselves as being civilized while the others are "savage." Once the friendship, routine and structure of their own country is taken away, the men have only themselves to rely on. Their own fears, insecurities, failings and weakness come to the surface. They feel abandoned by the steamer and frightened by their environment. Kayerts and Carlier honestly believe that Europeans are far advanced compared to native people. Their mission is to bring their way of life to "a savage people."

These characters represent what was going on politically and culturally during the period of European expansion. The great powers of Europe saw it as their duty to conquer and rule countries containing different cultures and races of people. Cultural diversity was an unknown concept. People were placed on a scale of value, from highest to lowest. The people of Africa were seen as the lowest kind of people. There was even debate about whether they were fully human. European colonists believed they were at the high end of human development. They used every kind of coercion to subdue native people. From guns to religion, they thought it was their right, even their duty, to expand European beliefs, values and social constructs all over the world.

Joseph Conrad wants us to see that people are people, no matter what the color of their skin, or the structure of their culture. He is masterful at presenting the darker side of humanity. In this story, nearly everyone is of dubious character. Makola, the band of strangers, Carlier and Kayerts; all are judging one another as inferior. Each of them is trying to overcome the other for his own gain.

In Chapter 1, several symbols that foreshadow the destiny of Carlier and Kayerts are introduced. First is the dead artist, lying in a grave on the grounds of the trading station. The symbolism here is explicit--the two European characters are likely to meet the same fate. Over the grave stands a crooked cross. Again, the symbolism is explicit: The cross is a universal symbol of sacrifice and redemption. Standing crookedly, one can infer that there is something amiss. Who is to make the sacrifice and to what end? Who is in need of redemption? How will those things come to pass in the story? One is warned ahead of time that the sacrifice and redemption will not follow the usual, archetypal path.

The steamer that delivers Kayerts and Carlier to their fate in Africa brings the message that morality and psychological support come and go in the life of a human being. Conrad makes the point again and again, that men are incapable of sustaining their goodness without constant reinforcement and feedback. The steamer simply abandons

the men, even though those on board can already see they will not survive. "I bet nothing will be done! They won't know how to begin. I always thought the station of this river to be useless, and they just fit the station." Chapter 1, page 3

As Kayerts and Carlier descend into a psychological nightmare, Conrad brings up the sound of drumming. Drums have the impact of providing a sound track to the narrative. Accepted by native people, the sound of drums brings the feeling of living in a non-civilized land to Europeans. There is a wild, emergent quality of energy that is delivered into the narrative at this point; Conrad tells us that the men are being overpowered by the unformed void that surrounds them.

Chapter 2 Summary

In this chapter we meet ten men who also live at the trading station. These people come from somewhere far away, and have been left by the director to unwillingly serve. They live in straw huts without basic nutrition. Consequently, they are unable to work, but sit passively miserable and weak. Although Carlier and Kayerts ring a bell each morning to summon the men to work, no one responds. They have no control over the men.

Suddenly, smoke rises above the forest. Makola informs the white men that armed men have attacked, capturing women and children and set fire to the village. Carlier and Kayerts learn that the bandits have more ivory than they can carry home. Makola tells them the armed men are bad but offers to get some ivory for them. The Europeans want the ivory.

Makola tells Carlier and Kayerts to keep the station men out of the way, suggesting they get them drunk on palm wine. Sure enough, a big party results. The white men go to sleep having seen a huge bonfire and hearing drumming from the men's quarters. In the middle of the night, Carlier and Kayerts wake abruptly. Terrified, they hear a shot fired and go outside. Makola tells them to go back inside before they ruin everything. They believe that Makola has everything under control.

When they come out the next morning, Makola is carefully washing a small dog. He shouts that all of the station men are gone. Carlier and Kayerts are angry, believing the men have just run away. They believe the men are ungrateful for the care they have provided to them. Makola presents the white men with six large elephant tusks. Then he tells them he traded the station men for the ivory. The Europeans are incensed and go to investigate. Not only are the station men gone, but also one of Gobila's villagers is dead.

Carlier and Kayerts think about what has happened. They cannot condone what Makola has done, but try to rationalize it. Meanwhile, Makola plays with his children as though nothing has happened. Kayerts and Carlier try to put the blame for the kidnapping on the culture, saying, "this is a funny country." They decide they should have nothing to do with the ivory because it is a result of slavery. Makola drags out the heavy ivory to weigh it. Because it is so heavy, Carlier gets involved in picking it up and bringing it to the

scale. Once he touches the ivory, he decides that the station men were company property; therefore the ivory is company property.

Gobila and his people are consumed with fear of the white men. They do not go near the trading station. Gobila decides that evil spirits have taken over the men, and he makes extra sacrifices to relieve them. While some of the villagers speak up and talk about killing the white men, Gobila decides that there might be even more dangerous consequences to his people if the Carlier and Kayerts are dead. He leaves them alone, thinking they might just return to the earth, the way the first manager had done.

Months are going by, and Gobila's people remain at a distance. Guilt is slowly consuming the Europeans, although they do not recognize it as guilt. The steamer is late. Their conversation descends into discussions about whether all of the natives should really be exterminated. Each man is now depressed, angry, blunt and guilty. They lose the feeling of being friends, and now feel like accomplices in a crime. When they run out of food, they exist on boiled rice and a small amount of coffee. They save the fifteen remaining lumps of sugar for an emergency. While they wait for the steamer, the clearing in the forest begins to fill with grass; the hunger and the heat are oppressive.

Carlier begins an argument, demanding the sugar. Kayerts refuses and calls up his superior position. In response, Carlier calls him a slave-dealer. Kayerts reacts violently, and Carlier takes a swing at him with a stool. Kayerts responds desperately and attempts to rush Carlier but flees to his room and gets out his revolver while Carlier attempts to break the door down.

Kayerts escapes through a small opening in the wall. Carlier gives up trying to break the door down and runs outside. They chase each other around and around the house until both men drop from exhaustion. Kayerts even has a moment where he realizes that this battle is ridiculous, but concludes he cannot give in on this matter or Carlier will turn him into his slave. The men get up and begin the chase again and run right into each other. Kayerts shoots Carlier. The whole incident is so sudden that Kayerts believes for a moment that it is he who has been shot. When he goes around the edge of the house he sees that Carlier is dead. Makola appears and agrees the other man is dead. Kayerts bursts into a sobbing fit, grateful to be alive. Makola points out that Carlier was unarmed. At first Kayerts is devastated, but he quickly finds his way out. He pronounces that Carlier must have died of a fever; Makola agrees.

Kayerts sits by the dead body of Carlier and thinks. His mind comes apart and he questions everything he has ever thought, experienced or known. At one point, he dehumanizes Carlier and thinks of him as only a "noxious beast." Later, he cries out to God for help. The steamer whistle pierces the fog. Makola goes off to meet the boat. Kayerts sees the cross, surrounded by the mist. He stumbles towards it even as the station bell rings out to greet the steamer.

The Managing Director lands and wonders why there is no one to greet him. He can hear the bell ringing in the fog. The captain and the engine driver run up the hill toward

the station, but the Director has already found him. Kayerts has hung himself from the cross. He had climbed the grave of his predecessor and swung off. *An Outpost of Progress* ends with the image of Kayerts' swollen tongue pointed at his Managing Director.

Chapter 2 Analysis

This chapter reveals the truly ugly underside of humanity, both native and European. Carlier, Makola and Kayerts all decide that commerce is more important than their fellow human beings. Through the process of dehumanizing each other, they manage to descend into the lowest forms of behavior and thinking processes. Makola sacrifices native people in order to provide ivory to the traders at the station. Carlier and Kayerts are initially disgusted with the idea, but then accept the benefit.

This dark spot in their character grows and multiplies in the isolation of the African forest. Once the issue of slavery has been overlooked, their social moorings give way. Everything they have ever believed comes up for scrutiny. In the end, Kayerts and Carlier have both lost their mind. Each one is paranoid and torn apart by guilt. They have lost the capacity to use what moral compass they had. Without the reference points provided by their culture, they become vulnerable to internal urges of violence. On page 12, ivory appears. The idea that the two men are in Africa for benevolent purposes is quickly dispatched. Ivory equals money in Colonial Africa. The appearance of this symbol shifts the story into a downward spiral. One knows ahead of time that the Colonists will do anything to secure the prize.

Joseph Conrad was a revolutionary in his time. The powerful countries of the world accepted the idea of European Expansion. The idea that white people were superior to those of color was nearly unquestioned. This perceived superiority ran very deep. Religion, culture, mores and values were all used to support the idea that Europeans were civilized while people in other countries were not. At the same time, an image of native people began to arise. The theory of the "noble savage," began to emerge. The "noble savage," was not perceived as equal to the white man. Rather, he was a curiosity, something the white man should benevolently protect.

This idea of benevolent protection has survived into our time. As we struggle to understand one another, some have idolized the different. In the civil rights movement, *all* black people were considered to be good, or *all* black people were considered to be bad. Joseph Conrad, speaking at the end of the nineteenth century, foresaw these issues. He presented his evidence that all men are equal from the dark side of the equation. In *An Outpost of Progress* he didn't try to point out the beauty in all people, no matter what their color or culture. Instead, he showed us that all people are capable of evil. In that way, we are also all equal.

As Chapter 2 begins, one is suddenly introduced to the ten native men that have been a part of the trading station since the beginning of the story. Here, Conrad betrays his own racism and ethnocentrism. It is not only the Europeans in his story who hold to the idea that white men are superior to black, but Conrad himself seems to believe this. One has

the impression that had Conrad lived long enough, he would have developed into a man who despised racism. But in the end, although Conrad was a man on the forefront of his times, he was still caught by the ankles in his own cultural mire. Conrad writes, "They were not happy, regretting the festive incantations, the sorceries, the human sacrifices of their own land; where they also had parents, brothers, sisters, admired chiefs, respected magicians, loved friends and other ties supposed generally to be human."

Characters

Kayerts

Kayerts has been assigned as the chief of the trading station. Conrad describes him as short and fat. Before he came to Africa, he worked as a bureaucrat with the Administration of the Telegraphs. Kayerts views his assignment as a chance to distinguish himself and gain profit. He also has a daughter, Melie, for whom he is earning a dowry. His underlying reason for being in Africa is that he believes Europeans are superior in every way to Africans. He is a pawn of the notion of European Expansion, the idea that powerful European nations have a right, even a duty, to other cultures to bring civilization to them.

Kayerts is a simple man. He seems to be incapable of coming up with creative solutions to his problems. Rather, he is like a boat set adrift. Unable to stick to a coherent course, he is propelled by his circumstances. One learns that his character does not run deep. He has always relied on the direction of supervisors, and the expectations of his culture. He is lazy, and bluntly ethnocentric. Thrown into an environment he is unfamiliar with, he quickly becomes overwhelmed and frightened.

Joseph Conrad uses this character as an "every man" of the time. Kayerts is not inherently a bad person, but he is also not a good person. His surroundings determine what he does. Without support and direction, he cannot combat his greed, selfishness, fear and confusion. He does not hold any moral conviction that is strong enough to stand him upright in the face of adversity or challenge.

Carlier

Kayerts' assistant at the trading station, Carlier is described as a tall man with a big head and a very broad body. His legs are thin. Carlier arrives in Africa with Kayerts, having been a member of the cavalry with the army. One learns that his unit was protected by the powers that be, and Carlier never had much work to do, nor was he ever exposed to danger. Because he was so lazy and obnoxious to his family members, his brother-in-law found him the position with the trading company in order to get rid of him. He is also completely unable to view Africa and its people with anything except contempt and fear. He makes continual derogatory comments about the native people, referring to them as "fine animals."

Carlier is also an example of the imperial views of European powers. Rather than simply admitting that they wanted more land, cheap labor and the resources of other countries, the colonists insisted that they were taking over other countries for the native's own benefit. Harnessing Christianity, European culture, language and customs, the Europeans sought to impose their world-views on native people.

Makola

Also known as Henry Price, Makola is a native man who has been at the trading station for many years. Although he works at the trading station, he despises the Europeans. Makola is an opportunist. He represents people who always see themselves and what they have to gain first. He uses the native people around him, as well as the two Europeans for his own benefit. He doesn't seem to hold any remorse whatsoever, but does whatever works best for him. Makola is involved in a despicable trade. Ivory is traded for the lives of ten native men at the trading station, and one man is killed.

Gobila

Gobila is a native chief from a neighboring village. His hair is gray and he is dressed in a white loincloth and a shabby panther skin. Gobila is innocent, trusting and good-hearted. He is also a magical thinker. He believes that the white man is immortal. Gobila supports the two men at the trading station, but he is wary of their supernatural abilities. He remains convinced that the dead predecessor of Kayerts and Carlier is going to rise up out of his grave one day.

The Managing Director of the Great Civilizing Company

Although his appearances are very brief in the book, the power of this character permeates every scene. He is referred to as the Managing Director throughout the story. At the end of the story Conrad calls him, The Managing Director of the Great Civilizing Company. This seems to be an overt, sarcastic reference to the true purpose of this character's life.

Kayerts and Carlier are motivated to please the director. Obliquely, they are motivated to please their culture and its goals of expanding its influence across the world. The Managing Director of the Great Civilizing Company represents entire countries and their drive to conquer native people under the banner of civilization. The director takes up the position of God in the story. It is he that determines the perceived rewards and punishments for the men at the trading station. He is assigned the power to determine whether or not the trade of ivory for slaves was correct, although he never gets the chance to do so. The director even has control over time. The departure and arrival of his steamboat act as the determinants of life for Carlier and Kayerts. When the steamer is late, the two men disintegrate quickly.

Native Station Men

There are ten men who have been abandoned by the director at the trading station. They desperately want to leave, but are afraid they will be killed on their way back to a faraway land. These men are never really described in the book. Rather, they seem to

represent the masses who simply wait in misery for someone else to direct their lives. Kayerts and Carlier have no compassion for them. Each day, they are summoned to work, but they are too weak to respond. They are labeled as lazy, when in fact they are too sick to do anything.

Conrad seems to use these characters to refer to human misery and the difficulties involved in gaining control over one's life. Power far beyond what these men hold determines what happens to them. Ultimately, they are sold into slavery, as Makola trades them for ivory.

Native Traders

The native traders are perceived as simply rising up randomly from the great river by the trading station. They appear and dissolve without any substance except for the ivory they bring. Carlier and Kayerts make fun of their appearance, their language and their mannerisms.

Conrad uses these characters to represent the way native people were seen by the imperialists. They have no face, no names, no origin and no destination. They have no feelings, and no identifiable qualities. The natives are just like a swarm of bees that deliver honey. Beyond what they can give, they have no value. Yet, the Europeans regard them from their perceived superiority and find them in need of being civilized. The notion of civilizing people is a thin veneer for the true purpose of exploitation.

The Armed Traders

Conrad singles out this group of natives in two ways: He gives them a language that the Europeans respond to, and he gives them power in the form of arms. The language issue is interesting. Kayerts and Carlier cannot understand the natives, yet their language seems familiar to them. The familiarity brings them into greater intimacy with these natives. They are no longer just faceless people who bring benefits, but like an animal who suddenly speaks, they are startling to the white men. It is harder for them to disregard these people as a dismissible group. The armed men become men, albeit they are still perceived as inferior, but they are men.

The arms issue is also interesting. Of course, Europeans ruled in a number of different ways, but they always began with raw power--arms. When both parties have weapons, there is a certain parity that cannot be ignored. Suddenly, the Europeans are confronted with *people* who hold *power*. It is as though these men have stepped through an invisible portal and become three-dimensional. The Armed Traders represent the coming power of the native peoples around the world to oppose the colonists. Conrad foresees the time when the European powers will be defeated in their quest to rule the world in the name of civilization.

The Dead Artist

The former head of the trading station is strongly portrayed. Conrad makes him an artist who was seeking to sustain his ability to paint by running the trading station. It is said that he died of a fever, but that excuse becomes doubtful as the story goes on. Artists lead a difficult life in the midst of commerce and raw greed. By nature, artists contribute a commentary on life. They take an unusual perspective and offer society an opportunity to view itself through other glasses. One is not simply entertained by art, but one is confronted and confounded by it. Artists raise the great questions of each generation who have ever lived in the world. Perhaps Conrad gives us this character to show us that the ability to raise questions about life are lying dead in the European culture at this time. The steamroller called European Expansion is virtually unquestioned by white people. It is taken as a given that all other cultures need to be tamed, subdued and then taught how to be "real people."

Mrs. Makola

The wife of Makola, this character becomes active when negotiations are made to sell the natives at the station for ivory. It is she who does the talking while Makola observes. One wonders if this is an old remnant of the "Eve in the Garden of Eden," motif from European culture. Women are seen as the root of all evil. Conrad does not allow his male characters to engage in the action of selling the men for goods. It is a woman who does the evil deed. Mrs. Makola has no other role in the book. She and her children seem to live normal lives until there is a deadly negotiation to deal with. At that point, she becomes very active and makes the deadly arrangements.

Objects/Places

The Trading Station in Africa

The main building sits in a clearing in the African forest near a large river. It is built out of reeds, with a verandah on all of the four sides. This place is occupied by Kayerts and Carlier. It has three rooms with plank floors, little furniture, and contains the litter of the two men. Conrad's portrayal of the building really does make it sound like an outpost. There is a sense that this is a very temporary living site. If left unattended, it would be swallowed up by the verdant forest within a short period of time.

Makola's Home

Makola lives in a shed on the trading station property.

The Station's Storehouse

Containing a variety of items such as beads, cotton cloth, wire, the building is made out of clay and has a dried-grass roof.

The River

The station is near a powerful river. The two white men have no control over what the river brings them. The symbolism of the river is that it can bring safety in the form of the steamship, danger in the form of the armed men, hope and security in the form of the managing director or disaster in the form of abandonment.

The Grave

The former station manager lies in his grave on the property. He serves as tangible evidence to the current employees that life is delicate and easily extinguishable.

The Cross

At one point in the story, the cross lies crooked. At another point, it is straightened again. This seems to be obvious symbolism. The cross stands for goodness, purity, sacrifice, selflessness, dedication and honesty. The fact that these things need to be straightened out by the characters is one of the major themes of the book.

The Camp of the Native Men

This place is like purgatory. The men there have done nothing wrong, but they are stranded, abandoned and powerless. They are simply waiting to be rescued by the same source that abandoned them. The feeling one gets is of desperation, misery, powerlessness, and weakness. One can argue that without direction and moral principles, that is the condition of all people.

The Ivory

Ivory becomes everything to the Kayerts and Carlier. They quest for it and allow human beings to be sold for it. While it is easy to say that ivory represents money, the two main characters are more concerned with pleasing the director than they are with the actual value of the ivory.

The Steamboat

The steamboat symbolizes the ebb and flow of societal structure and controls in human life. It delivers the two Europeans to the distant shores of their culture's control over the world. There, it deposits them with the mission to take further territory for their country under the guise of running a simple trading station. The two men cannot function without the direct guidance and support of their culture. By the time that structure returns, they are both dead and ten other men have been sent into slavery.

Social Sensitivity

One of Joseph Conrad's satirical and ironic treatments of imperialism, which his character Marlow would condemn in Heart of Darkness (1902; see separate entry)as the exploitation of the earth at the expense of people of races less fortunate than the white, is "Outpost of Progress." As such, it invites comparison with Heart of Darkness, Nostromo (1904; see separate entry), and other Conrad works. In "Outpost of Progress," Conrad's disenchanted view of imperialism is presented more openly and with perhaps less ironic subtlety than in his more mature works. Hence, it has been customary to view the work as a rough sketch for the powerful tragic vision of Heart of Darkness. Both Kayerts and Carlier, the naive European agents, fall into gradual moral decay during their months at their isolated station. Although at first they try to be scrupulous, they eventually are ready to rationalize and accept almost any method of obtaining ivory from the natives. Frequently in the story (as in its tide), Conrad refers to the importance of progress and civilization with undisguised irony, since neither idea seems to apply to the sordid and petty events at the isolated station where Kayerts and Carlier fall into a senseless quarrel climaxed by Kayerts's impulsive killing of Carlier.

Another related social concern is the impact of the wilderness and of primitive cultures on the minds of the supposedly civilized Europeans, Kayerts and Carlier.

Both characters are shown having shallow and untested moral natures, worn down psychologically by their isolation in a wilderness, by the silence of the land, and by the harshness of the customs and the life around them. Not only are both characters offered as caricatures of the civilizing force of white society, but they are also early examples of the "hollow men" who populate many of Conrad's stories and novels.

Again and again in his fiction Conrad suggests that European society does not prepare people to live well in situations which require strong inner resources or an ethic of self-reliance. Kayerts and Carlier are only two examples of poorly educated and untested moral natures in Conrad's canon.

A third social concern is the need for European civilization to gain a better understanding of the African peoples and cultures it was exploiting in the ivory trade. Both the company's director and the two ill-fated agents have little understanding of the black people they work with, and indeed, they tend to treat native Africans with contempt.

Techniques

"Outpost of Progress" employs a straightforward and direct narrative technique quite different from the more complex and elaborate series of narrative perspectives that Conrad would use in such later works as Lord Jim (1900; see separate entry). In "Outpost of Progress," Conrad employs a method close to the omniscient narrator point of view of much nineteenth century fiction, especially that written before the innovations of Gustave Flaubert and Henry James.

The nature of Conrad's characters is revealed rather quickly and sardonically by Conrad's own narrative voice. Early on, Conrad's narrator tells the reader that both Kayerts and Carlier are rather shallow minds without imaginative resources.

Moreover, it is not long before this voice informs the reader that Kayerts and Carlier are not even capable of sticking diligently to routine duty tasks, because, as Conrad puts it sententiously, "To grapple effectually with even purely material problems requires more serenity of mind and more lofty courage than people generally imagine." However, Conrad also allows the Director of the trading company to complement his narrator's views by offering a contemptuous assessment of the two agents.

Conrad's narrative voice becomes surprising (in the light of contemporary attitudes) in its casual use of the term nigger in referring to Makola, and in the comment that Makola, despite his veneer of civilization, nourished the worship of "evil spirits." In contemporary times, it is unlikely that a fiction writer would characterize the gods worshiped by a Native African or a Native American as "evil spirits."

Later in the story, Conrad comments about the rather weak expressions of horror made by Kayerts and Carlier covering Makola's illegal trade with the visiting tribesmen, by asserting in the customary sententious and philosophizing manner of nineteenth century authors: "Everybody shows a certain respectful deference to certain sounds that he and his fellows can make. But about feelings people really know nothing ... " Here Conrad as narrator is following the conventional manner of such novelists as Thackeray and the early George Eliot who interrupted the narrative to comment directly on what was happening to the reader. Obviously, Conrad in this story has not yet assimilated his material to his later command of multiple narrators and a modernist use of ironic perspectives.

Although Conrad handles the violence in the story's ending with restraint, his obvious lack of sympathy for his protagonists probably undercuts the story's ironic effect. Nevertheless, the irony of the ending is heightened by the return of the company's director after eight months, an arrival which comes too late to save the two frightened agents.

In summary, while Conrad employs the techniques of nineteenth century realism competently in "Outpost of Progress," the story is far less skillful and complex in its handling of narrative and character than later Conrad works. Nevertheless, Conrad's

narrative creates a suitably ironic effect, and this has helped the story to maintain its reputation for a century.

Themes

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One of the most prominent themes of the story is the gradual moral regression of Europeans in a savage setting in the tropics, a characteristic subject of Conrad's early and middle fiction. Kayerts and Carlier begin their few months at the isolated interior station with optimism, lacking awareness of the psychological perils of the boredom and sense of insignificance that await them during their months at the station.

Conrad also notes the limited nature of the two agents' imaginations. Had they been more imaginative, they might have understood better the peril they were entering. However, the story depicts Kayerts and Carlier turning to reading for entertainment for the first time, and becoming fascinated with the romantic exploits of heroes like D'Artagnan in Alexander Dumas' novels and Hawkeye in James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking saga. The presence of such books turns out to be ironic: Conrad implies that such heroic models will not be helpful in the reality of the African bush.

Finally, the criminal exploitation of the African wilderness is a major theme, since it is central to Conrad's savage indictment of imperialism. Not only are elephants slaughtered wantonly for their tusks, but Kayerts and Carlier become accomplices by giving their tacit approval to the criminal practice of ivory piracy by a strange native tribe with whom Makola makes a deal. Although the company pretends to be a civilizing force, Conrad's ironic view is that the demands of the company for ivory encourage savage and barbaric practices by the natives, a poignant theme that Conrad develops in Heart of Darkness.

Racial Equality

Conrad is brilliant at delivering the message that all people are equal. He does this by revealing the capacity for evil, rather than the more common emphasis on the inherent goodness within all people. Carlier, Kayerts and Makola each believe that they are superior to one another. Makola is equally racist and mercenary. Carlier and Kayerts are equally morally unhinged.

Conrad's message is that all people, no matter what their color or culture are capable of despicable actions. He tells us that we need the social structure around us in order to keep our basic nature in check. But he reveals that culture itself can also be evil. At once, Kayerts and Carlier were held in check while they lived in their homeland. But they are then propelled into aggression against the people of Africa by that same culture.

Psychological Strength

Conrad's work emphasizes the fragility of humankind. He mocks cultural beliefs, and people who subscribe to them. At the same time, he shows us what happens when people are left to fend for themselves without societal constraints. Carlier and Kayerts descend rapidly into disintegration and fragmentation when they have no one to reference to. They are unable to sustain their idea of right and wrong when no one is watching.

The African forest itself serves as a symbol of psychological flooding. The idea is that our civilized psychological self, the self that we have been trained to be, will fall if not carefully maintained. Conrad gives us the idea that the land itself, and the wildlife it supports are much stronger and forceful than man can ever be. He sets a stark contrast between a delicately built construct of human beliefs against the powerful natural world.

In the end, the natural world wins.

Independent Thought

Carlier and Kayerts are incapable of independent thinking. They adhere to the beliefs they have been taught within their culture. When those beliefs do not hold in a foreign environment, they collapse into depravity. Instead of rising to the challenge that faces them, they passively wait for their culture to come and rescue them. Even within their own culture, they follow leaders without thinking about it. Their thought patterns are based on who has taught them. The status of their leaders is their focus, not the worthiness of the leader's thoughts.

Morality

Conrad plays with issues of morality by having his primary native characters, Makola and his wife, betray members of their own race and culture. The men of the trading station are used to buy ivory without compunction. By doing this, Conrad levels the playing field in terms of one's thoughts about morality. One can no longer assign the term "good," to native people and "bad" to Europeans. One cannot turn things the other way around either.

At the end of the book, Kayerts hangs himself on the cross. This is an act of personal execution on the alter of common moral principles. He knows he has done wrong, but realizes he was incapable of stopping himself. He cries out to God for help. Only God can reverse time and erase his actions. Carlier does not spring back to life. There is no resurrection, so there must be a sacrifice.

Imperialism

European expansion delivered a near fatal blow to many cultures around the world. In the name of "civilization," Europeans felt they had free reign to destroy cultures that had existed long before the Roman Empire. One cannot say that their motives were purely financial. On the contrary, many good people honestly believed that the people outside of their culture needed to be saved from themselves. This belief provided an enormous drive to deliver redemption across the globe. Of course, the colonists received huge financial returns for the efforts. The idealistic viewpoint about the value of their European culture provided a deep insistence about having their own way. One wonders whether or not the people of Europe would have supported the naked idea of extermination, exploitation and greed with regard to other countries. It is interesting that these basic drives had to be covered over with the exuberant mission of delivering civilization to otherwise lost people.

Style

Point of View

Conrad's story is presented as a narrative. Although nameless, the narrator feels like a bitter colonist who is now standing slightly overhead, observing the actions of those who are still behind him in psychological understanding and sociological development. In fact, one feels that this story serves to deliver a political and sociological message under a thin veneer of a work of fiction.

It has been argued that Conrad himself was at once a racist, and a stronger objector to racial relations in colonial Europe. Certainly, both of these descriptions of him can be argued from the text. For example, the narrator states, "The contract with pure unmitigated savagery, with primitive nature and primitive men, brings sudden and profound trouble to the heart." Chapter 1, page 3

Later, the narrator makes reference to the ten native men at the trading station, saying: "But belonging as they did, to a warlike tribe with filed teeth, they had more grit, and went on stupidly living through disease and sorrow." Chapter 2, page 12

Although Conrad was a radical in his times, covertly challenging the most dominant belief system of his time--Colonial Expansion--he is still a man of his times. Although the narrator clearly understands that both good and evil are present in men and women no matter their color, he also is unsure of exactly how Europeans and native people rate in terms of equality. There is a clear condemnation of the motives and practices of colonial Europeans, but Conrad leaves us with a more subtle form of racism. He does not lift native people up as examples of community and culture with merit of their own. Instead he condemns Europeans for their exploitation of "savage people." This narrator is not a benevolent dictator. Rather, he is sharply judgmental of the Europeans and their actions. Implicitly, he leaves us with the assumption that the native people are far below the developmental status of his countrymen.

Setting

Written in 1896, *An Outpost of Progress* is set in colonial Africa. The action is confined to the trading station itself, like a theatrical play that gives us only one view through which the actors play out their story. There are other places, which are alluded to in the story. The trading post exists in isolation within the vast territory of Africa. The author states, "And stretching away in all directions, surrounding the insignificant cleared spot of the trading post, immense forests, hiding fateful complications of fantastic life, lay in the eloquent silence of mute greatness." There are neighboring native villages not far from the trading post. "At times, Gobila came to see them. Gobila was the chief of the neighboring villages."

Conrad gives a powerful vision of the river that brings the unknown abruptly into the lives of those at the trading station. He states, "The river seemed to come from nowhere and flow nowhither. It flowed through a void. Out of that void, at times, came canoes, and men with spears in their hands would suddenly crowd the yard of the station."

Chapter 1, page 6

At the beginning of Chapter 2, there are ten native men associated with the trading station. They have their own village nearby. He writes, "They lived in straw huts on the slope of a ravine overgrown with reedy grass, just behind the station buildings." Chapter 2, page 12

Structure

An Outpost of Progress is divided into two parts. Comprised of only twenty-six pages, it manages to deliver a uniquely powerful message. At times, the narrative is presented in long, complex sentences composed of many clauses: "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."

At other times, there are brief, direct interchanges between the characters: "What lingo is that?" said the amazed Carlier. "In the first moment I fancied the fellow was going to speak French. Anyway, it is a different kind of gibberish to what we have heard."

"Yes," replied Kayerts. "Hey Makola, what does he say? Where do they come from? Who are they?" Chapter 1, page 9

Conrad writes in long paragraphs. The effect is that one gets thoroughly caught up in the narration without a moment to consider separate thought patterns. One sees pictures in the mind, deciphers a dark and brooding feeling tone, and is caught in a web of downward psychological confusion.

Language and Meaning

The language in this piece is clearly 19th century, colonial European. Whether it is the narrator speaking, or the characters themselves, the use of words is at once critical, sarcastic and judgmental. There is no compassion here for either the native people or the European colonists. Rather, the language serves to inform one that impending disaster is about to befall not only these characters, but also the policy of colonial expansion itself.

The language is mesmerizing, leaving the sense of having been somehow dosed with a hypnotic relaxant. Here is another example: "A deep, rapid roll nearby would be followed by another far off- then all ceased. Soon short appeals would rattle out here and there,

then all mingle together, increase, become vigorous and sustained, would spread out over the forest, roll through the night, unbroken and ceaseless, near and far, as if the whole land had been one immense drum booming out steadily an appeal to heaven."

Chapter 1, page 11

There is a sensation of being pulled gently under the surface of a great sea. There is no abrupt warning about the sinking morality of the Europeans. Rather, the language weaves its way around one, creating lower and lower platforms from which to consider the situation. In a matter of twenty-six pages, one has departed from the norms and mores of one culture, detached oneself from the ordinary considerations of right and wrong, and is finally washed up on the shores of corpulent corruption.

Quotes

"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."

Chapter 1, page 3

"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."

Chapter 1, page 3

"Society, not from any tenderness, but because of its strange needs, had taken care of those two men, forbidding them all independent though, all initiative, all departure from routine; and forbidding it under pain of death. They could only live on condition of being machines."

Chapter 1, page 4

"They lived like blind men in a large room, aware only of what came in contact with them (and of that only imperfectly), but unable to see the general aspect of things."

Chapter 1, page 5

"The river, the forest, all the great land throbbing with life, were like a great emptiness."

Chapter 1, page 5

"The river seemed to come from nowhere and flow nowhither. It flowed through a void."

Chapter 1, page 6

"And stretching away in all directions, surrounding the insignificant cleared spot of the trading post, immense forests, hiding fateful complications of fantastic life, lay in the eloquent silence of mute greatness."

Chapter 1, page 7

"The two men understood nothing, cared for nothing but for the passage of days that separated them from the steamer's return."

Chapter 1, page 7

"It spoke much of the rights and duties of civilization, of the sacredness of the civilizing work, and extolled the merits of those who went about bringing light, and faith and commerce to the dark places of the earth."

Chapter 1, page 7

"It sounded like one of those impossible languages which sometimes we hear in our dreams."

Chapter 1, page 9

"Soon short appeals would rattle out here and there, then all mingle together, increase, become vigorous and sustained, would spread out over the forest, roll through the night,

unbroken and ceaseless, near and far, as if the whole land had been one immense drum booming out steadily an appeal to heaven."

Chapter 1, page 11

"Had they been of any other tribe they would have made up their minds to die- for nothing is easier to certain savages than suicide- and so have escaped from the puzzling difficulties of existence."

Chapter 2, page 12

"'I can hardly believe it,' said Kayerts tearfully. 'We took care of them as if they had been our children.'"

Chapter 2, page 14

"Makola did not open the store; he spent the day playing with his children. He lay full-length on a mat outside his door, and the youngsters sat on his chest and clambered all over him. It was a touching picture."

Chapter 2, page 16

"But about feelings, people really know nothing."

Chapter 2, page 16

"We talk with indignation or enthusiasm; we talk about oppression, cruelty, crime, devotion, self-sacrifice, virtue, and we know nothing real beyond the words. Nobody knows what suffering or sacrifice mean- except, perhaps the victims of the mysterious purpose of these illusions."

Chapter 2, page 17

"Whenever they mentioned Makola's name, they always added to it an opprobrious epithet. It eased their conscience."

Chapter 2, page 17

"A man may destroy everything within himself, love and hate and belief, and even doubt; but as long as he clings to life, he cannot destroy fear: the fear, subtle, indestructible, and terrible, that pervades his being; that tinges his thoughts; that lurks in his heart; that watches on his lips the struggle of his last breath."

Chapter 2, page 18

"It was not the absolute and dumb solitude of the post that impressed them so much as an inarticulate feeling that something within them was gone, something that worked for their safety, and had kept the wilderness from interfering with their hearts."

Chapter 2, page 18

"It was the occasion for a national holiday, but 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."

Chapter 2, page 19

"There was the surprising flash of violent emotion within him, as if in the presence of something undreamt of, dangerous, and final."

Chapter 2, page 20

"Then, as Carlier was trying to upset the table, Kayerts in desperation made a blind rush, head low, like a cornered pig would do, and over-turning his friend, bolted along the verandah, and into his room."

Chapter 2, page 21

"He was completely distracted by the sudden perception that the position was without issue- that death and life had in a moment become equally difficult and terrible."

Chapter 2, page 22

"Kayerts shut his eyes. Everything was going round. He found life more terrible and difficult than death."

Chapter 2, page 23

"His old thoughts, convictions, likes and dislikes, things he respected and things he abhorred, appeared at their true light at last! Appeared contemptible and childish, false and ridiculous."

Chapter 2, page 24

"Incidentally, he reflected that the fellow dead there had been a noxious beast anyway; that men died every day in thousands; perhaps in hundreds of thousands- who could tell- and that in the number, that one death could not possibly make any difference; couldn't have any importance, at least to a thinking creature."

Chapter 2, page 24

"Progress was calling to Kayerts from the river. Progress and civilization and all the virtues."

Chapter 2, page 25

"Society was calling to its accomplished child to come, to be taken care of, to be instructed, to be judged, to be condemned; it called him to return to that rubbish heap from which he had wandered away, so that justice could be done."

Chapter 2, page 25

"The Managing Director of the Great Civilizing Company (since we know that civilization follows trade) landed first, and incontinently lost sight of the steamer.

Chapter 2, page 26

"And, irreverently, he was putting out a swollen tongue at his Managing Director."

Chapter 2, page 26

Adaptations

A reasonably faithful 45-minute dramatic adaptation was oriduced for television in 1982 by Robert Richardson. The featured players included Simon McCorkindale, Dorian Walker, and Thomas Hellberg.

Key Questions

One approach for discussing "Outpost of Progress" could focus on parallels and contrasts with Heart of Darkness. Since most readers interested in Conrad's work will be familiar with the more famous story, it should be easy to develop comparisons between that novella and the handling of similar themes in "Outpost of Progress."

Another interesting approach might be to discuss the question of racism in regard to Conrad's treatment of native Africans. In the opening passages of the story, Conrad's narrative voice uses the word nigger as a descriptive term for the black Africans. Although such a use was fairly common in nineteenth century writing, the word has become overwhelmingly associated with racist feeling.

Moreover, in the era of political correctness, the word has been virtually demonized, since many argue that its mere ap pearance in any novel is sufficient to make the book racist in character. It might be worthwhile to discuss white attitudes in the story, and to consider to what extent Conrad himself may have been reflecting the racism of his time.

1. Compare and contrast the deterioration of the white protagonists in "Outpost of Progress" with the degeneration of Kurtz in Heart of Darkness.

2. Discuss the racial attitudes of the main white European characters in "Outpost of Progress." To what degree can we discern the racial attitudes of the author?

3. What should our view be of the character of Makola (or Henry Price)? Is Makola really a worshiper of demonic spirits, or is he an imperfectly civilized man? What motivates Makola?

4. Compare and contrast Kayerts and Carlier in their attitudes toward the wilderness. Is Kayerts morally more aware than Carlier? Why or why not?

5. Is there a latent homosexual attraction between Kayerts and Carlier during their stay at the station? What are their attitudes toward women?

6. In "Outpost of Progress," Conrad is rather reticent about sexuality, in contrast to Heart of Darkness, where it is clear the Kurtz has enjoyed the favors of a native mistress. What factors may have influenced Conrad not to deal directly with the theme of sexual experience in "Outpost of Progress"?

7. The description of the station and the wilderness is consistently bleak and desolate, with little effort to provide contrast. Is this a fault of the story's development? If so, then why is it a fault?

8. What is the tone of Conrad's use of the words "progress" and "civilization" in the story? Is the irony of Conrad's use of these words subtle or painfully obvious?

Why?

9. How does Conrad characterize the Director of the trading company? Does this portrait reinforce other themes in the story?

10. What is the Director's view of Kayerts and Carlier? Why does he give them such important positions in the company's hierarchy?

11. What trade or deal seems to be made by Makola with the visiting group of strange tribesmen? Is this deal indeed a trade of the company's men (as slaves) for ivory?

12. Discuss the absurd nature of the final quarrel between Kayerts and Carlier.

Why is the apparent concern over sugar merely a pretext?

Topics for Discussion

How is Conrad's work relevant to today's world? Explain.

Are morals and ethics intrinsic and independent of culture, or must they be taught and maintained? Explain.

Do you think that Kayerts and Carlier were unique, or do they portray the condition of mankind? Explain.

Is Imperialism a factor in the world today? Explain.

Use at least three of the symbols in Conrad's work to amplify your position on racism today.

How do you think you would have fared if you had been placed in Carlier and Kayerts' position? What do you think would have happened and why.

What factors do you think contribute to how people think and feel?

How important do you think culture is to your understanding of the rest of the world?

Literary Precedents

Although there are no obvious literary models for "Outpost of Progress," it may be assumed that Conrad was offering an ironic comment on the imperialist fiction of such writers as Rudyard Kipling and H. Rider Haggard. Conrad's protagonists are diametrically opposed to the hardy and stubborn defenders of British imperial tradition in Kipling's fiction, although here, as in Heart of Darkness, it is Belgian imperialism in the territory known as the Belgian Congo which is the primary target.

However, Conrad's story, rooted in the realistic tradition of nineteenth century fiction, is reminiscent of short stories tracing the decline of their main characters by Guy De Maupassant—such as "A Piece of String." At the time of the composition of Almayer's Folly (1895), his first novel, Conrad was reading Maupassant with pleasure and this writer remained something of a model of realism for Conrad throughout his career. Conrad was also familiar with the fiction of Gustav Flaubert and such realists as Henry James, with whom Conrad corresponded.

Related Titles

"Outpost of Progress" suggests comparisons with Heart of Darkness, Conrad's masterpiece of shorter fiction about the deterioration of a European in the tropics. Both stories are set in Africa and deal with the ivory trade, and the similarity between Kayerts in "Outpost of Progress" and Kurtz in Heart of Darkness is hard to overlook. In point of fact, "Outpost of Progress" is often treated as an early sketch of the material that produced Heart of Darkness. The chief differences between the short story and Heart of Darkness are the absence of the perspective of Marlow as a narrator and the rather desultory and predictable nature of the Europeans' descent into boredom and self-destruction.

However, "Outpost of Progress" also is related in theme to such earlier Conrad works as "The Lagoon" (1898), and to Conrad's first two novels; Almayer's Folly and An Outcast of the Islands (1896). All of these treat the experience of white Europeans in the tropics ironically, and An Outcast of the Islands is an extended study of a white man's degeneration in the world of Malaysia and the Indonesian islands. One theme that all these works share with "Outpost of Progress" is a critical and sardonic view of European pretensions about imperialism.

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