Combining the New Historicism and Postcolonial Criticism with Psychoanalytic Criticism

Although you have been introduced to postcolonial criticism as well as the new historicism earlier, you have not been introduced to psychoanalytic criticism. Because the essay that follows mixes the postcolonial and a new historicist approach with psychoanalytic criticism, a brief explanation to psychoanalytic criticism has been incorporated into this introduction of Tony C. Brown's "Cultural Psychosis on the Frontier: The Work of the Darkness in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness."

WHAT IS PSYCHOANALYTIC CRITICISM?

Most psychoanalytic criticism is grounded in the theories of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), who posited the importance of the unconscious. Freud called the predominantly unconscious, irrational, instinctual self the id, using the term ego to refer to the rational self, or "I," and superego to reference those aspects of the psyche that derive from external influences—parents, schools, churches or synagogues or mosques, and so forth.

The conscious mind, according to Freud, acts as a censor, driving underground, as it were, unconscious or conscious thoughts or instincts that it deems unacceptable. Repressed (and therefore psychologically significant) thoughts or desires often emerge in dreams, a subject Freud
took up in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). But they also can be in language (for instance, through so-called Freudian slips), in creative activity (art, including literature), or, of course, in neurotic behavior. One of the unconscious wishes we have all suppressed, according to Freud, is the childhood wish to displace the parent of our own sex and take his or her place in the affections of the parent of the opposite sex. (These wishes Freud referred to as “oedipal,” naming a psychological complex after the Greek tragic hero Oedipus, who unwittingly killed his father and married his mother.) But Freud identified other fixations (oral and anal), compulsions (the compulsion to repeat traumatic events), and instincts (the death instinct) as well.

Psychoanalytic critics writing before 1980 tended to psychoanalyze individual authors; poems and novels were read as fantasies that allowed authors to indulge repressed wishes, to protect themselves from deep-seated anxieties, or both. Then the focus shifted to the psychology of readers and their individual responses to texts. Still later, literary critics employing the psychoanalytic approach used not only Freud’s ideas but also those advanced in the seminars and writings of Jacques Lacan, who discussed “the gaze”—the human tendency to want to see and be seen—and who developed Freud’s concept of the “mirror stage” in human development, a pre-oedipal stage during which the child comes to recognize him or herself in the mirror as a separate entity and therefore develops the concept of the Other, which eventually includes even the mother.

Additionally, Lacan theorized that there are three “orders” of subjectivity pertaining to the ways in which the individual self, or psyche, takes in and/or colors its world: the Imaginary Order, the Symbolic Order, and the Real. Although Lacan’s conceptions of the Imaginary and the Symbolic probably differ from what you may imagine them to be, based on common understandings of the meanings of those terms, his conception of the Real is not only more useful but also more relevant to Brown’s essay. Specifically, Lacan’s Real is the intractable and substantial world of traumatic knowledge that resists and exceeds interpretation. The Real cannot be imagined, symbolized, or known directly. It constantly eludes our efforts to name it (death, gravity, sexual difference, and the physical effects of trauma are examples). The Real is fundamentally “Other,” the mark of the cut, or divide, within conscious and unconscious life and is signaled in language by gaps, slips, speechlessness, and the sense of the uncanny.

Other major theorists who have influenced psychoanalytic criticism include Carl Jung, who studied broad-based archetypes as they express themselves in individual human lives and mythological and literary representations, and D. W. Winnicott, whose ideas have more recently led psychoanalytic critics to view reader and text not in “either/or” terms but, rather, in terms of a “dyadic” relationship, not unlike the mother/child relationship they have posited in place of Freud’s destructively powerful oedipal bond.

Tony C. Brown begins the essay that follows by citing the work of two postcolonial cultural critics: Homi K. Bhabha, who has noted with irony “the long shadow” that Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* casts over postcolonial studies, and Edward Said, who wrote of the “ambivalent status” of colonialism in the text, which at once offers a subversive, critical perspective on colonial discourse and serves as a central example of that discourse. (Brown points out that even the view of *Heart of Darkness* as a subversive critique of colonialism involves a “repetition” of Western, anti-African prejudice, since in order for Marlow, on his return home, to realize and reveal “the darkness at home in the very heart of Europe” he “must still uphold, as it were, the first term”—i.e., the view of Africa as the “primal seat of darkness.”)

Brown’s own perspective, as becomes apparent as his argument unfolds, is not entirely or even primarily that of postcolonial criticism; it also offers a distinctly psychoanalytic perspective. His focus is on “the peculiar conceptualization of the darkness in Conrad’s writings,” the “way the darkness works,” and “what . . . is produced through the work it does.” Brown views the darkness—which he several times calls “the cause of the horror”—as a “cultural psychosis” and, more specifically, as a “frontier phenomenon,” that is, a culturally generalized psychotic phenomenon which Marlow comes to recognize in far-flung colonial places but also “at home in Europe.”

In order to understand “the operation of darkness” as a culturally generalized psychosis, Brown adopts an historical perspective as he reviews accounts of atrocities being carried out in the Congo that were “appearing in an ever increasing quantity” in the European press toward the end of the nineteenth century. An “image of the Congo as an abject zone of horrors,” Brown writes, “became embedded in the European social imagination,” serving as “a kind of shorthand for a frontier zone of brutality and terror” (p. 354). But the “cause of the horror” had, in Brown’s words, “an ambivalent status,” for “it was not the case that reports of atrocities in the Congo Free State shocked their European audiences simply because they reported hideous events; rather, what was so abhorrent about these events was that they occurred as part of
what was supposed to be the actions of a civilizing mission” (p. 354; this is where Brown’s historicist account becomes new historicist). The “dominant role played by colonial forces in the production of the horror of the Congo,” he goes on to say, “disturbed a commonplace conception of the colonial zone as itself inherently barbaric” (p. 354).

In order to understand “the operation of darkness” on Conrad specifically, Brown points out that his editor, Edward Garnett, suggested that the author’s own, actual “Congo experiences were the turning-point of his mental life,” bringing about his “transformation from a sailor to a writer. . . . The sinister voice of the Congo with its murmuring undertone of human fatuity, baseness and greed,” Garnett wrote, “had swept away the generous illusions of his youth, and left him gazing into the heart of an immense darkness” (pp. 357–58). Conrad admitted as much in his essay “Geography and Some Explorers,” in which he said that his trip to the Congo brought about an abrupt “end to the idealized realities of a boy’s daydreams!” (25).

“What Garnett and Conrad both articulate,” Brown goes on to state, “is the collapse of Conrad’s experiential organization,” in other words of “fantasies” that had heretofore “structured Conrad’s reality.” More specifically, this “traumatic event” occurs due to what the psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan called “the encounter with the real” (p. 359), a term he uses to refer not to reality as we ordinarily think of it but, rather, to that which cannot be known directly, imagined, symbolized, or interpreted (such as death, gravity, the physicality of objects). Relating James Clifford’s claim that Heart of Darkness bears witness to a subjectivity grounded in cultural codes and conventions, particularly language, Brown asserts that “an irritation [i.e., an incursion, invasion, or breaking in] which forces an emptying out of culture’s conventions would also force an emptying out of the fashioned self” (p. 360). He proceeds by arguing that Conrad’s and Marlow’s — and especially Kurtz’s — Congo experience involved just such an irritation. “In Kurtz’s case death was the result of the experience. By contrast, the experiences of Conrad and Marlow, though involving a confrontation with the threat of dissolution, were not as extreme as Kurtz’s, and they both survive to tell their tales — though undergoing . . . a significant transformation of self” (p. 360).

In discussing their traumas and recoveries, Brown recounts “a famous dream” recorded by psychoanalytic theorist Sigmund Freud, a dream in which Freud “peer[ed] down the throat” of a female party guest to see “the flesh one never sees, the foundation of things, the other side of the head, of the face, of the secretory glands, . . . the flesh from which everything exudes” (p. 361). The subsequent, literally nightmarish anxiety — “You are this, which is so far from you, this which is the ultimate formlessness” — Brown likens to the Congo trauma that left Conrad “gazing into the heart of an immense darkness.” Brown subsequently likens the conclusion of Freud’s dream — in which he finds himself among friends who are fellow doctors — to the scene that initiates Conrad’s plot and ends Marlow’s story: “In the place of Freud’s fellow doctors . . . Conrad had his readers and Marlow [had] his four ship-deck listeners (the Lawyer, the Accountant, the Director of Companies, and the anonymous framing narrator)” to “giving . . . signification” (p. 362) to what has been said, to “attempt . . . some kind of management and control of the trauma” (p. 362) that has been experienced in the Congo.

But such attempts are not always successful, as Brown points out; in fact, within Marlow’s narrative — and at “a heightened, climactic point” in Conrad’s novel — “there is revealed the absolute and terrifying failure of signification and its attendant authority in the midst of the dark wilderness” (p. 362). While recounting his nighttime search of the jungle for Kurtz, who has escaped the steamer and returned to the wilderness, Marlow appeals to his listeners by saying “don’t you see, the terror of the position was not in being knocked on the head — though I had a very lively sense of that danger, too — but in this, that I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low” (p. 82).

From the perspective of cultural as well as psychoanalytic criticism, the phrase “in the name of” is doubly significant. First, it acknowledges that “it was precisely because the authority of civilized codes lay elsewhere that Kurtz, in his isolation, was ‘found out’ by the wilderness.” Second, “in the name of” calls forth a recognition of the arbitrary aspect of language.” Throughout his narrative, Marlow has seen “the expressly arbitrary naming of natives as ‘enemies,’ ‘criminals,’ and ‘rebels’” — and how these names are used by the culture of colonialism to “ legitimize” everything from forced work to executions. But when Marlow confronts Kurtz in the jungle and finds himself unable to “appeal in the name of anything,” even this lowest-level form of signification proves impossible; as Brown puts it, “the relational and qualitative terms of sense-making — high and low — have become indistinguishable, without anchorage in any stable system of language: words . . . have lost the power to point beyond themselves” (p. 364). Calling this “the
space of civilization’s dissolution or foreclosure,” Brown writes: “Marlow encounters Kurtz in a space beyond signification and is left without recourse to the distinguishing codes of civilization, with their controlling influence and authority. The reality structured through these codes has slipped, fallen away to reveal, in Lacanian terms, the monstrous grimace of the real” (p. 365).

WORKS CITED


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Cultural Psychosis on the Frontier: The Work of the Darkness in Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness

Therein consists the most elementary formal definition of psychosis: the massive presence of some real that fills out and blocks the perspective openness which is constitutive of “reality.”

-SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK, “Grimaces of the Real”

Heart of Darkness is the novel that invites the most comment and interpretation. It serves as a resource for many of the central arguments in the book. In Said’s early discussions of the complex address and consolidation of the imperial idea as ideology, Heart of Darkness features prominently. In the later, postcolonial perspectives that deal with resistance and oppression, Said demonstrates the “anxiety of influence” generated by the novel on the anti-colonialist fictions of Ngugi wa Thiongo, The River Between, and Tayeb Salih, Season of Migration to the North.3

When we turn to Said’s book, Bhabha’s comments are clearly borne out as Conrad’s novel takes on a privileged and at times pervasive role. Importantly, however, there is a particular tension running throughout Said’s discussion and use of Heart of Darkness to which Bhabha does not immediately direct our attention. This tension emerges from Said’s recognition of an ambivalent status afforded colonialism in Conrad’s novel, as it at once offers critics a perspective from which can be gained critical leverage on the discourse of colonialism and yet is itself one of the most concentrated and influential documents of modern colonial discourse.”4 In terms of the former, Heart of Darkness has commonly been seen to present a subversive perspective through Marlow’s perversion of the West’s image of itself as the place of light and civilization. After his up-river journey into the heart of darkness, the Western metropolis is revealed to Marlow cloaked in the folds of darkness he encountered at the ends of the earth: the white woman, the Intended, resembles Kurtz’s African woman; the tall houses lining the city streets appear in the profile of the posts with human heads on them outside Kurtz’s Inner Station; and the pounding of his heart echoes the beat of primitive drums heard in the depths of the jungle. As Bhabha himself observes, in Marlow’s revelation of the darkness at home in the very heart of Europe through such a “discourse of demonic doubling,” he “beholds the everyday reality of the Western metropolis through the veil of the colonial fantasm.”5 In doing so Marlow performs a perversion of the West’s ideal-image of itself as the true seat of civilization and light — a perversion which offers a certain critical leverage for interrupting the perpetuation of this self-image.

3Ibid., 272, n. 1.
5Bhabha, “How Newness Enters the World,” 213.