

Modernism is an artistic movement that took place in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries which consciously broke from classical and traditional forms. The movement was retroactively connected by a few key features, but was clearly concerned with ideas that exposed, critiqued, and diverged from accepted cultural norms. Themes of empire, colonialism, and cultural difference concerned a number of modernists. Many modernist texts aimed to uncover the attitudes and thought processes that led to imperialism, and many aimed to deconstruct its effects. An example of such is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in which the protagonist/narrator Charles Marlow, while taking a journey through the Congo, actively participates in colonialism and simultaneously seems to question it. Modernism and imperialism, however, are both complex, as seen in this early modernist work of Conrad. Srila Nayak asserts that 'the complexities that characterize Conrad's literary modernism create a divided narrative in which the relations among modernism, race and imperialism work in several ways'¹. In one way *Heart of Darkness* is a resolute criticism of western colonialism, in another way it is a psychological evaluation of an often racist Marlow, where the focus lies more in the storytelling itself rather than the story being told. Distinct modernist elements of experimentation with new literary forms and techniques, an uncertain and introspective narrator delivering suggestively rather than reliably, and a non-chronological and fragmented narrative structure allow imperialism to be examined under a unique lens or a series of lenses. Another modernist text, *Dubliners* by James Joyce, utilizes a series of lenses in the form of perspectives to analyze the effects of imperialism. The later work by Joyce sees a society impacted by British colonialism. The perspective of multiple Dubliners aims to unveil a self-conscious, socially anxious, and emasculated Dublin at the hands of British imperialists. James Shapiro wrote that 'in a very real sense Dubliners of the period were living lives not truly their own'. He goes on to cite Declan Kiberd; 'in his highly acclaimed work *Inventing Ireland*, [Kiberd] asserts that in *Dubliners* "Joyce... described an Ireland filled with echoes and shadows, a place of copied and derived gestures, whose denizens were turned outward to serve a distant source of authority in London"'². Joyce uses modernist structures and ideas to explore the general consciousness of a people repressed by the standards and authority of their colonizers. It is the purpose of this essay to explore how and why the themes of imperialism, colonialism, and cultural diversity are approached in the modernist works of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and James Joyce's *Dubliners*.

The early modernist novella, *Heart of Darkness*, is a novella that juggles ideas concerning both the origins and the results of western imperialism, with a focus on the reasoning of imperialists

¹ Nayak, Srila, "Two Narratives of Modernism in 'Heart of Darkness,'" *Conradiana*, 44 (2012), 29–49
<<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24669397?seq=1>> [accessed 13 April 2020]

² "Alan N. Shapiro, Visiting Professor in Transdisciplinary Design, Folkwang University of the Arts, Essen, Germany," *The Identity and Anxiety of Colonial Dublin in Joyce's Dubliners*, by James Shapiro "Alan N. Shapiro, Visiting Professor in Transdisciplinary Design, Folkwang University of the Arts, Essen, Germany
<<http://www.alan-shapiro.com/the-identity-and-anxiety-of-colonial-dublin-in-joyce's-dubliners-by-james-shapiro/>> [accessed 14 April 2020]

and the justification for imperialism itself. The novella begins with an unnamed first narrator, but centers around the introspective European sailor Charles Marlow as he travels down the Congo as a riverboat captain for the Belgium company. Marlow single handedly stands to represent and question imperialism in the text. As a European, his desire to explore, or to conquer, is encouraged by the society he lives in. It is only in select moments on the shores of an abused Africa that Marlow questions his own mentality. The journey itself reveals the cruelty and neglect inflicted upon the natives of Africa, as they are forced into the Company's service; 'They walked erect and slow, balancing small baskets full of earth on their heads, and the clink kept time with their footsteps...I could see every rib, the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain'³. Marlow and Conrad himself do not seem to shy away from descriptions of what can only be read as western brutality, and yet Marlow's concern and empathy for these people varies. Even as Marlow is struck by the inhumanity of their treatment, his language is entrenched in western, racist stereotypes, describing the men in chains as 'unhappy savages'⁴. Moments such as this occasionally bring the character to clearly question the rationale of imperialism. However, Marlow just as often seems to carry on without acknowledging the role he or his country plays. He also often appears to mock or justify imperialism. For example, Marlow describes a large map of Africa divided out and claimed by different countries for different 'work' and states that there is 'a vast amount of red -- good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there' and goes on to say that there is a purple patch 'to show where the jolly pioneers of progress drink the jolly lager-beer'⁵. He could either be justifying this division and exploitation of an entire continent or aggressively mocking it, showing that Conrad was attempting to handle the nuance of imperialism and portray the complex thinking of someone raised to accept it. While the use of the frame-story in *Heart of Darkness* was not particularly new at the time or distinctly modernist, Marlow as a character, the narrative structure his questionably unreliable stream of consciousness provides, and other features of the narrative structure are some of the most prominent modernist tools that Conrad employs to explore the common belief system of western imperialism. Another distinctly modernist element was the first narrator implying that readers should look for the meaning of the story in its meaning for and influence on Marlow rather than in the story itself. This narrator stated vaguely that 'Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine'⁶. Imagery and symbolism like this is used throughout the text, loosely suggesting the meaning behind the story along with Marlow. James Joyce's *Dubliners* is similarly saturated with themes of imperialism, colonialism, and divisions of culture. Joyce approached these topics in his novel in a separate, but equally obscure way. Unlike Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Joyce's novel, or collection of short stories, seems to concern itself very little with the experience of imperialists, and in a sense the motivations

³ Conrad, Joseph, *Heart of Darkness* (Charlottesville: the Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia, 1999) <<https://web.archive.org/web/20050319095242/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=ConDark.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=all>> p.80

⁴ Ibid p.80

⁵ Ibid p.73

⁶ Ibid p.68

behind imperialism and colonialism. Instead, Joyce uses the belief in imperialism and its associated language and mythos to subvert reader's expectations, criticizing the beliefs from an external perspective. For example, one of the short stories in *Dubliners*, "Araby," uses western, imperialistic ideas and associations of what was called the Orient, a projected image of the East by the West that aimed to romanticize a misunderstood and oppressed collection of regions, to hold Ireland in solidarity with the East for being similarly colonized by British powers. Joyce recognized and related Ireland to the East because Ireland, like the multitude of cultures presented as the East, was being exploited by British colonizers through landlordism, laissez-faire economic systems and land holding patterns⁷. Irish citizens were left to work lands that no longer belonged to them and felt unheard by the new system. This experience was conveyed to the reader through the young protagonist of "Araby" as he describes walking 'through the flaring streets, jostled by drunken men and bargaining women, amid the curses of labourers, the shrill litanies of shop-boys who stood on guard by the barrels of pigs' cheeks, the nasal chanting of street-singers, who sang a come-all-you about O'Donovan Rossa, or a ballad about the troubles in our native land'. He concludes that 'these noises converged in a single sensation of life for me: I imagined that I bore my chalice safely through a throng of foes'⁸. The image Joyce crafts of the street of Ireland shows the restless anxiety felt by the boy and those around him. As demonstrated in this quote and widely accepted in western, imperialist thinking, Ireland was viewed as a conquered and impoverished community, a far less mysticized or interesting focus of discussion compared to the East. Western conceptualizations of the Orient were used in *Dubliners* for the purpose of illustrating the conditions of Irish life. Joyce's utilization of oriental discourse would have attracted readers at the time while concurrently showcasing the false portrayal of the East as a place of beauty and escapism. While Joyce uses features of Orientalism in his work, it is clearly not meant to glorify the Western construct of the Orient. Instead, he employs this misinterpretation to assist his description of a boy living in the less glorified location of Ireland, which is also under colonial rule. The title, "Araby," promptly associates the story to the romantic perceptions of the Orient, as "Araby" is the poetic interpretation of Arabia used by Western writers to describe the Orient as a sensual location. However, the following story is simply the tale of an Irish boy and his encounters with a girl and a bazaar. But, despite this fact, more images and illusions to the orient persist throughout the story. For example, the boy says that 'the syllables of the word Araby were called to me through the silence in which my soul luxuriated and cast an Eastern enchantment over me'⁹. This is an obvious reference to the Orient, showing that the boy himself subscribes to western beliefs. The girl, who is the object of the boy's infatuation in the story, is a subtler and continuous reference to orientalism. The girl, who is unnamed throughout the story, is described as a 'brown figure,' with a 'soft rope of hair'¹⁰. She is also described as wearing a 'silver bracelet'¹¹ that evokes the image of shackles. The girl also appears to the boy as visions and apparitions, surrounding her in

⁷ See Kincaid, Andrew. 2005. "Ireland and Postcolonial Theory," *e-Keltoi: Journal of Interdisciplinary Celtic Studies*, 9.2, ed. by Clare Carroll and Patricia King

<<https://dc.uwm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1044&context=ekeltoi>> [accessed 15 April 2020]

⁸ Joyce, James. *Dubliners* <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2814/2814-h/2814-h.htm#chap03>> [accessed 15 April 2020]

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

a fantasy in spite of the fact that she is a real person. This mirrors the distorted impression of the Orient by the West, transforming the girl into a symbol for the East and the boy into a symbol of the West who romanticizes and misunderstands her. The boy relies on the girl to distract him from the negativity in his own life in the same way that the Western illusion of the East disregards or overlooks the oppression of the region. The entire work of *Dubliners* relies on the modernist use of symbolism such as this, as well as epiphany and narrative techniques such as the shifting of perspectives and the dilution of plots to examine these imperialist concepts.

Both Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and James Joyce's *Dubliners*, however, are concerned not only with imperialism as a rationale and its connected concepts, but with the impact and effects of imperialism and colonialism in practice. As mentioned, one of the main ways Conrad accomplishes this is through harsh, vivid descriptions of the brutality the natives of Africa were experiencing at the hands of European colonizers. An example is when Marlow describes not only the terrible conditions of the Africans in the Company's service, 'dark things seemed to stir feebly...the joints of their limbs were like knots in a rope; each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were connected together with a chain', but the unfairness that led them to the company's service, 'they were called criminals, and the outraged law, like the bursting shells, had come to them, an insoluble mystery from the sea', and the pointlessness of the work the company has them doing; 'A horn tooted to the right, and I saw the black people run. A heavy and dull detonation shook the ground, a puff of smoke came out of the cliff, and that was all. No change appeared on the face of the rock. They were building a railway. The cliff was not in the way or anything; but this objectless blasting was all the work going on'¹². Here, Conrad demonstrates some of the effects of imperialism, leaving the readers to question if it is worth it for themselves. Throughout *Heart of Darkness*, he goes on to show that the people of the Congo and the land itself are economically exploited. Conrad shows colonists taking or looking for ivory, making money off the trade of it, but giving back little or nothing of value to the natives and holding little regard for the land that might be damaged in the process. Conrad, unlike other modernists and those writing on imperialism, focuses on the damaging effect colonization has on the souls of the white colonizers. While this amount of attention on the white colonizers makes the novella feel somewhat unbalanced, it does allow *Heart of Darkness* to extend its criticism of colonialism all the way back to the corrupt "civilization" of Europe. We can see this corruption in many characters in *Heart of Darkness*, especially in the characters of Kurtz and Marlow in different ways. While Kurtz and Marlow presumably begin with similar mindsets entrenched in imperialism and beliefs in colonialism, the two characters leave Africa in vastly different places. Conrad describes that Kurtz has literally lost himself to the heart of darkness, and suggests that the true heart of darkness rests within man, whereas Marlow slowly begins to realize that his initial support of colonialism was corrupting and he manages to distance himself from it, perhaps saving himself from a heart of darkness. By the chronological end of Marlow and Kurtz journey

¹² Joyce, James. *Dubliners* <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2814/2814-h/2814-h.htm#chap03>> [accessed 15 April 2020]

in Africa, Kurtz had become brutal and lost in his greed, dying in Africa, and Marlow had left Africa and the company ravaging it, realizing that England “has been one of the dark places of the earth”¹³. Joyce’s *Dubliners* explores the effects of colonialism more thoroughly than Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, focusing exclusively on its effects on the people being colonized rather than those doing the colonizing. By arranging stories of multiple lives in Dublin, from those just beginning, to those reaching their end, Joyce aims to focus on the results of colonialism on the society itself. *Dubliners* focuses on the highly modernist themes of loneliness, paralysis, anxiety, loss of identity, and death, all of which were caused or impacted by Ireland’s colonization. Throughout the work, Joyce describes the bleak and oppressive landscape of Dublin highlighted by the character’s own observations about and relations to it. *Dubliners* opens with the words ‘there is no hope’¹⁴, alluding to the tone and feeling of hopelessness throughout the work and the society of Dublin. Here, the city of Dublin represents both the often unwelcome introduction of modern technology and of English oppression; it serves to constantly remind the characters of their powerlessness. This is often underlined by the emasculation of the male characters in the stories. Characters within the novel are often overanalyzing every social interaction, critically concerned with how they will be perceived by others. For example, in “Two Gallants,” Lenahan is shown to calculate his actions in response to others rather than giving genuine reactions, and he worries about the toast he will have to give well before he needs to give it. In “The Dead,” the character of Gabriel has similar concerns over the reception of his actions, questioning himself when a light-spirited remark to the servant girl Lily is met with bitterness. Another indication of existential anxiety and self-consciousness in *Dubliners* is that characters continually compare themselves to some ideal, long for the seemingly unattainable, and question the value of their own lives. These ideas are strongly represented in the metaphor in the story of “Two Gallants” that depicts Ireland as the iconic harp and alludes to Ireland being adrift, without the control over its own destiny; ‘He plucked at the wires heedlessly, glancing quickly from time to time at the face of each new-comer and from time to time, wearily also, at the sky. His harp, too, heedless that her coverings had fallen about her knees, seemed weary alike of the eyes of strangers and of her master’s hands’¹⁵. These recurring themes capture the social implications of English colonialism by underlining the key ways pressures for social change from an outside society, monetary impoverishment, and being forced to adapt to new regulations changed Irish society on the personal level. Many of the afflictions and troubles of individual characters in *Dubliners* can be read as allegories for the larger problem all of Ireland faced under the oppressive thumb of English rule. Shapiro asserts that ‘English rule and mistreatment of

¹³ Conrad, Joseph, *Heart of Darkness* (Charlottesville: the Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia, 1999) <<https://web.archive.org/web/20050319095242/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=ConDark.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=all>> p.67

¹⁴ Joyce, James. *Dubliners* <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2814/2814-h/2814-h.htm#chap03>> [accessed 15 April 2020]

¹⁵ Ibid

Ireland was one of, if not the main, cause of the anxiety, self-consciousness, social disconnect, malaise, and mental paralysis in the picture of the Irish people that Joyce paints in these stories'¹⁶

In conclusion, I believe this essay has sufficiently explored the significance of the themes of empire, imperialism, colonialism, and cultural difference in the modernist work of *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad and in *Dubliners* by James Joyce. were approached in the modernist works of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and James Joyce's *Dubliners*. Across the two works, modernism seems to handle these ideas and their associated concepts in different ways. Conrad's work showed the participation in and the questioning of these subjects, focusing on the perspective of imperialists and colonizers themselves. Conrad seemed to understand imperialism in a nuanced way, perhaps empathizing with Westerners that were surrounded by such beliefs. Joyce's collection focused on a broad view of the society of Ireland, hinting at many intricacies of how Dublin was changed by English rule. Joyce seems to hold little sympathy for those who believe in or participate in empire, imperialism, colonialism, utilizing a series of lenses and perspectives to analyze the effects of imperialism, and exploring many themes. The later work by Joyce sees a society impacted by British colonialism. The perspective of multiple *Dubliners* aims to unveil a self-conscious, socially anxious, and emasculated Dublin Both modernist texts, however, aimed to analyze the attitudes and thought processes that led to imperialism to varying capacities, and both similarly aimed to deconstruct its effects.

¹⁶ "Alan N. Shapiro, Visiting Professor in Transdisciplinary Design, Folkwang University of the Arts, Essen, Germany," *The Identity and Anxiety of Colonial Dublin in Joyce's Dubliners*, by James Shapiro " Alan N. Shapiro, Visiting Professor in Transdisciplinary Design, Folkwang University of the Arts, Essen, Germany
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