CHAPTER 3
WRITING THE EMPIRE: JOSEPH CONRAD AND THE COLONIAL IDEOLOGY

Joseph Conrad’s perspective about imperialism and race relations has been the subject of a large corpus of criticism. There are inherent factors in Conrad’s fiction that preclude any final judgment on matters relating to its connection with colonial ideology and race relations. In fact, one of the hallmarks of Conrad’s fiction is its ambiguous nature in relation to the colonial ideology. Whether he supported the empire through his fiction or advocated the cause of the oppressed and the colonised is a difficult question to answer. Conrad himself defended, in the Author’s Note to his novel *Almayer’s Folly*, his setting his tales in far-off regions, because ‘there is a bond between us and that humanity so far away. I am content to sympathize with common mortals, no matter where they live’ (8). There is no proof that is compelling enough to show that Conrad is an imperialist, in spite of Chinua Achebe’s famous criticism of him as an imperialist. Achebe’s was one of the loud voices in condemning Conrad for the alleged racism of *Heart of Darkness*. Contrasting Conrad’s depictions of a European woman and depiction of an African woman, Achebe finds the ‘the
bestowal of human expression to the one and withholding of it from the other’ (122). Achebe maintains that Conrad sees the African as beastial, horrible and that nothing noble can be expected from them (123). Achebe’s conclusion is ‘that Conrad is a bloody racist’ (124). Achebe even denies Conrad the status of a great artist as he allegedly indulges in racial prejudice.

It is hard to classify Conrad as a defender or condemner of colonialism or to count him as someone who glorifies or vilifies the white race. The evidences turn out to be on all sides, forever nebulous and conflicting. This happens because there are inherent conflicts in Conrad’s identity. He had to leave his native land, but he seems never to have reconciled himself to his chosen home. In addition, it is a notable fact that he avoided setting any of his major works in Eastern Europe, especially Poland, the land of his descent, and it is quite normal to find in that a lingering pain that never vanished. If one puts a plain question as to whether Conrad was an imperialist or anti-imperialist the answer would only be ambiguous in the light of his fictions. It is difficult to make so ambivalent a text as *Heart of Darkness* serve a precise political purpose. It is a story told by Marlow as he sits in a boat on the Thames, of a voyage up the Congo River in search of the mysterious Kurtz, whose cruelly exploitative methods in the ivory trade set him apart from
other Europeans. One can find that Kurtz is the most representative example of colonial barbarity. The novel is considered as a powerful attack on the ideologies of European colonialism. Despite its clear criticism of the imperialist project, the novel works at, as Edward Said suggests, ‘restoring Africa to European hegemony by historicizing and narrating its strangeness’. (198), discursively, that is to say, it operates in an imperialist manner, its assumptions being those of the white man finding himself, or his steadily disintegrating self. At one point in his narrative Marlowe observes of a chain-gang that ‘they were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now- nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom’ (44). At best, the novel’s stereotypes almost remove all content from Africans, denying them humanity. Elsewhere, there are much more brutal stereotypical descriptions. The forceful narrative of Marlowe’s initial abhorrence of the heedless devastation brought about by the European invaders is overpowered by his increasing fascination with an ‘unspeakable’ darkness. The river, which enables the ‘fantastic invasion’ to take place and the booty to be brought back, is framed by an untamable ‘jungle’ the darkness of which can be read as literal, metaphorical, or allegorical. Giving more credence to the idea that language itself is duplicitous, Heart of Darkness questions realism’s
notion of the ability of narrative to express truth as such. This perception then becomes the novel’s meaning itself. Hence, at one level, the narrative boldly exposes the awful greed of colonialist exploitation; at another level, it is a meditation on the incapability of language to communicate truth. It is to be noted that *Heart of Darkness* begins with a eulogy of Britain’s imperial endeavors. It invokes the great milestones, which the river Thames had marked in the history of the British Empire:

The narrative refers to all the men of whom the nation is proud, like Sir Francis Drake, Sir John Franklin and the great Knights-errant of the sea etc. ...they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword and often the torch, messengers of might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. (4)

Marlow begins his tale by distinguishing colonialism from mere conquest. He maintains that colonialism of the modern times is entirely different from conquests that involve brute killings and the ‘snatching’ of a particular territory from its inhabitants as was done by the Romans in the past. Marlow creates an ambience where he could define and justify colonialism of the modern times and says:

What saves us is efficiency- the devotion to efficiency. However, these chaps [the Roman conquerors] were not much, account, really. They were no colonists; their administration was merely a
squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force- nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. They grabbed what they could get for the sake of what was to be got. It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a grand scale. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look at it too much. (8)

This attempt at giving colonialism an acceptable definition or the very presence of such a definition can potentially make this text a pro-colonial one but still the complexities of the narrative in both form and content render the text ambiguous. In fact, this ambiguity can be compared with the rift within the western culture itself due to the hybridity necessitated by the colonial contact. Since actual colonial encounter entails the need to accommodate different cultures and races, colonial contact subverts many of the pretensions of the white race and the colonial discourse. An analysis of *Heart of Darkness* demonstrates this fact because the cruel exploitative and irrational activities of the European colonial powers subvert and makes a mockery of the conception of modern European culture as one rooted in rationality and
moral order. Benita Parry refers to this aspect of colonialism when she talks about Conrad’s duplicity and his tendency for paradoxical narrative. She describes Conrad’s writing as a

Contrapuntal discourse where the authentic rendering of imperialism’s dominant ideological categories is undercut by illuminations of the misrecognitions and limitations in a form of cognition which saw the world in black and white. (2)

As a compassionate man of deep insight and understanding, Marlow is both a sympathetic defender of colonialism and a strong critic of it. Simultaneously, Conrad’s text clearly and consistently brings to light what Marlow himself feels but only imperfectly comprehends. The disturbing inconsistencies of his role points to the fact that the rhetoric of the civilizing mission persuaded Europe to acknowledge the abomination of King Leopold’s Congo: in that respect, ‘all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz’ (117). Marlow experiences repugnance when he is confronted by the chain gang, but when the ‘reclaimed’ native guard in charge of it gives a ‘large, white, rascally grin’, he grimly recognizes that he ‘ also was a part of the great cause of these high and just proceedings’(65). As Marlow makes his spiritual journey to find Kurtz, his experiences and his convictions fight each other. Both Marlowe and Kurtz are deeply influenced by their colonial
experiences and their reasons for being there include a boyhood fantasy in Marlow’s case and sensitivity to Christian altruism in Kurtz’s.

*Heart of Darkness* depicts Marlowe’s loss of innocence, especially with respect to his idea of the ‘civilizing mission’. The story of his failed quest for the redeeming idea is situated within a narrative whose origins and borders are as obscure as his own ‘inconclusive’ tale. Marlow is drawn into his Congo adventure by the influence of a boyhood memory and his ‘passion for maps’. Forced into agreement with Kurtz’s final nihilistic utterance, Marlowe overcomes his repugnance for lying by protecting both Europe and Kurtz’s Intended with a lie. Marlowe’s liberal hopes and Protestant work ethics are laid bare as mere hollow entities. Like Memmi’s ‘coloniser who refuses’ (19-44), Marlowe becomes increasingly irrelevant to what the Congo is all about. The ‘redeeming idea’ with which his tale begins turns out to be no more than a ‘great and saving illusion’ (159).

However, separating Marlow from Conrad does not completely settle the issue. Conrad is nowhere present in the text as a counter to Marlowe, not even as an ‘author effect’. Even the character of Marlow does not enunciate the complete meaning of the text. Its two distinctive narrative strands - the representative bourgeois gathering on the Nellie and the narrative of Marlowe’s Congo journey - simply meld. The
inconclusiveness of one matches the uncomprehending silences of the other. Both ‘tales’ end with their remaining participants gazing into a metaphysical ‘darkness’, while the actual darkness engulfing London lies ominously behind them. If *Heart of Darkness* is to have a ‘deep’ meaning, it can be located in its profound ambiguity of meaning itself. It is this ‘profound ambiguity’ of meaning which characterizes the aesthetics and politics of this work. No reading of this novel would be possible without acknowledging this fact. This ‘profound ambiguity’ resides in the treachery of its poetry, which constantly hovers between myth and history, and confronts truth telling with the self-conscious duplicity of its own language.

Conrad starts by evoking a remote past in which Marlowe discerns the beginnings of European exploration and early settlement. His language is subtly equivocal:

They had sailed from Deptford, from Greenwich, from Erath – the adventurers and settlers; king’s ships of men on ‘Change; captains, admirals, the dark ‘interlopers’ of the Eastern trade and the commissioned generals of the East India fleets. Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of spark from the sacred fire. What
greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery
of an unknown earth...The dreams of men, the seed of
commonwealths, and the germs of empires. (47)
Marlow’s tale is conceived partly as a response to this
introductory passage, which rehearses the familiar progressivism of
nineteenth century historians. Its idealism amalgamates post-
enlightenment humanism, the Darwinian narrative of humanity’s
triumph over the natural world, and Britain’s noble project of modernity.
The motley crowds of Europeans swarming across the globe carry
swords and torches as emblems of both the power of conquest and the
light of civilization. However, these traditional symbols can function
properly only as long as the meanings they embody remain stable. The
great Promethean ‘advance’ of fiery torches was in any case always
ambivalent because, although they benefit humanity they can also
become weapons of violence and oppression. Marlow’s rhetoric on ‘the
dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires’ (3).
might appear to celebrate imperial expansion. But as a narrative of
desire, this movement from ‘dreams’ through ‘seed’ to ‘germs’
represents Europe’s penetration of the dark places of the earth as
pathogenic. Such indeterminacies constantly thwart Marlowe’s quest for
his justifying idea.
A careful analysis would reveal that *Heart of Darkness* questions imperialism’s claim to be the agent of universal progress and in possession of all knowledge. Marlow’s use of contradictory terms when assertively speaking of the imperial venture ‘as the forerunner of change, of conquest, of trade, of massacres, of blessing’ (98), signifies the ambiguity of the text. Besides, the indication of menace in the tribute made by the narrator to Britain’s long history of imperial endeavors involves the imperialist self-representation in question:

The old river…had borne all the ships whose names are like jewels flashing in the night of time, from the Golden Hind returning with round flanks full of treasure…. To the Erebus and Terror, bound on other conquests – and that never returned. (6-7)

More explicitly, the reiteration of received phrases such as the ‘heavenly mission to civilize’, ‘the noble, exalted cause’, ‘just proceedings’ and ‘magnificent dependencies’ serve to mock imperialism’s grandiloquence in an explicit manner. One can see that Marlow speaks of a morally depraved colonialism: ‘I foresaw that in the binding sunshine I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak- eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly’ (23). But still the text’s racist idiom cannot be overlooked. The fiction elaborates on images already familiar to the western readership through nineteenth
century anthropological discourses (an immense, matted jungle, an 
impenetrable forest, naked black bodies, warlike yells, spears, 
population given to cannibalism). The black figures in the unearthly 
landscape are described as belonging to the beginning of time, their 
speech a savage discord and their souls vestigial. Moreover, since 
Marlowe perceives the people as uncanny and repugnant doubles, a 
sense of their ‘distant kinship’ disturbs him. Even though he 
acknowledges this ‘distant kinship’, he disavows consanguinity and 
affirms his own inviolable identity and cultural authority:

    An appeal to me in this fiendish row – is there? Very well; I 
    admit, but I have a voice too, and for good or evil, mine is the 
    speech that cannot be silenced. (52)

    In the last decades of the nineteenth century the European powers 
had divided Africa among themselves, the lion’s share going to England 
while the other powers like Portugal and Belgium tried to expand their 
overseas empire. After the Berlin conference of 1884-1885 the vast area 
of the Congo came under Belgian rule, as the personal property of King 
Leopold the Second, whose longing for an African empire enhanced by 
Henry Morton Stanley’s sensational story of his adventures, later 
published as Through the Dark Continent (1878). Stanley’s reports of 
the continent’s immeasurable and untapped wealth was supported by
other reports, and in 1876 an article appeared in *The Times* alluding to the unspeakable riches potentially available in the Congo basin regions. Leopold’s regime in Congo attracted attention in Europe for its rapacious imperialist practices. The agents involved in collecting rubber and ivory from the local people were notorious for their vandalism. When the news of Belgian atrocities reached England, public figures like Roger Casement, E.D Moral, R. Cunningham Graham and Charles Dike exposed these practices in print and public meetings. Although their criticism were in large directed at the excesses of the Belgium administration, some of the protesters were vigorous in denouncing the entire imperialist project in Africa. When Conrad embarked on *Heart of Darkness*, he was already acquainted with the stark realities of the European colonial enterprise in Africa mostly through his own direct experience in Congo and through exposure to Stanley’s expedition in Sudan in 1889, published as *In Darkest Africa* (1890). The imperial ventures involving the brutal killing of Africans had prompted criticisms in journals such as *Cosmopolis*. This is not to suggest that Conrad set out to write or produce a tract devoted to exposing the iniquities of colonialism in Africa. His novel was first serialized in the pro-imperialist *Blackwood’s Magazine*. Conrad’s object when writing a
fiction with realist dimensions seems to be the defense of the empire but at the same time to lay bare the evils of the Belgian rule in Congo.

The diction of *Heart of Darkness* parodies the new accents brought to colonial discourse by imperialism, its all consuming ambition evoked in Marlowe’s recall of Kurtz opening his mouth, ‘voraciously...as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him’ (85). Once Conrad told Graham that, he liked to work with ‘definite images’. One such image juxtaposes the civilized efficiencies of the Central Station, with the grove of death; another is the groans of the ‘nigger’ beaten for his ‘responsibility’ for the fire (76). Since both images show how the moral basis of the colonial authority has collapsed, the binary terms that structure its language are here turned against the colonisers. The Kenyan novelist, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, points to another unforgettable image in the novel: the skulls on the poles facing Kurtz’ house. No African writer, he said, ‘had created so ironic, apt, and powerful an image’ of the moral failure of European colonization’ (285). The image of skulls on poles, which works in complex ways, embodies meanings that provoke political and ethical questions. Minimally, it exposes the brutal and abominable underside of the civilizing mission. Furthermore the image of the emaciated Kurtz, desperately crawling though the ‘jungle’ towards the
lights and drum beats of the black ritual going on beyond the colonial compound adds much to the terrible picture.

While Conrad was writing *Heart of Darkness* the idea of Africa as a source of untold and untapped resources had a huge impact on European imagination. But Africa occupied another place in European imagination: that is as a place of mystery and degradation, the representation of which being neither amenable to nor ever subjected to scrutiny. In the popular imagination of Europe, the image of dismembered heads registers a view of how Africa has domesticated the monstrous. It is interesting to note that Conrad was so close to this received opinion and rumor because Marlowe is not shocked by Kurtz’s garden of severed heads, it being ‘only a savage sight’ with ‘a right to exist – obviously in the sunshine’.

It becomes obvious that a fictional narrative such as *Heart of Darkness* celebrates an Africa, which is mysterious and morally depraved. The novel delineates a primordial physical landscape and a menacing metaphysical presence, a world devoid of history and culture. Consider:

Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world… An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest (48)...We were wanderers on prehistoric
earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet….

We were cut off from comprehension of our surrounding… We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember…..we were traveling in the night of first ages (51)… never before did this land, this river, this jungle, the very arch of this blazing sky, appear to me so hopeless and so dark, so impenetrable to human thought, so pitiless human weaknesses. (79-80)

One can find in *Heart of Darkness* a symbiotic relationship between the depravity of imperialism’s agents and the moral dangers emanating from the land:

I saw him [a company manager] extend his short flipper of an arm for a gesture that took in the forest, the creek, the mud, the river- seemed to beckon with a dishonoring flourish before the sunlit face of the land a treacherous appeal to the lurking death, to hidden evil, to the profound darkness of its heart (47).

The character of Kurtz is significant here: ‘how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own… The wilderness had found him out, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself, which he did not know…. till he took counsel with this
great solitude….It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core (83).

As witness to Kurtz’s fall, Marlowe is assailed by, ‘something altogether monstrous, intolerable to thought and odious to the soul (92)… compelling him to fight for Kurtz’s redemption: I tried to break the spell-the heavy mute spell of the wilderness – that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions…this alone had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspiration. (94-95)

If Kurtz’s downfall is inaugurated by the uncanny influence of the exotic land, then it is completed by his interaction with its people, a lakeside tribe amongst whom he forgets himself, whom he had subdued and subjected with his guns commanding not just their respect but worship. This is an instance in the text of the evil and exotic Africa beguiling and intoxicating even the rational and civilized white man. Kurtz is seen to be a dedicated agent of imperialism who is eloquent about an entrusted cause and high purpose and has a voracious appetite for possession – ‘my Intended, my ivory, my river, my – everything belonged to him’ (70), and whose psychic and moral disorder is inextricably linked with his identity as a colonialist. Hence, colonialism
becomes a corrupting force here. This would mean as if the rational and sober white man has to make a descent into hell in the process of civilizing the ‘other’, an idea that reinforces the racist ideology of western superiority. This can be linked to the Christian idea of redemption, where Christ had to descend from heaven and become a scapegoat in order to save the ‘world’. If *Heart of Darkness* is analysed in this way, the text becomes less complex and it explains many thing like the yoking together of the apparent anti-imperial comments and the racist idiom asserting western superiority. Hence, the text can be assumed to portray how the white man has to compromise his moral superiority that is the hallmark of his civilization in order to civilize ‘the other’. Hence it is to be noted that colonialism becomes a corrupting force that demoralizes the white man who tries to subdue the colonial subject in an evil manner. The noble discourses of progress and enlightenment that inaugurated colonialism is held under suspension here. The text is replete with descriptions of the ‘exotic and incomprehensible Africa’:

Moreover, outside, the silent wilderness surrounding the cleared speck on the earth struck me as something great and invincible, like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion…. The silence of the land went home to one’s
very heart- its mystery, its greatness, the amazing reality of its concealed life…the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence...The woods were unmoved, like a mask…they looked with their air of hidden knowledge, of patient expectation, unapproachable silence…the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life. (33, 37, 48)

Of Conrad’s novels discussed in this thesis *Lord Jim* is the only one whose focus is clearly British. Hence it provides an opportunity for reexamining the question of Conrad’s relationship to British imperialism. One of the questions, which the readers of *Heart of Darkness* often asked, was whether its negative criticism of imperialist project was aimed singularly at Belgium or included Britain as well. Conrad’s shrewder approach to the politics of empire in *Lord Jim* necessitated the application of certain strategies of narration. One such ‘strategy’ was to locate the novel in the dark interiors of Borneo. Conrad may have chosen Borneo simply because he saw a market for tales about it, or because it provided him with ‘material’ drawn from his own real-life experiences of the Malay Archipelago. *Lord Jim* substitutes contemporary events for the light literature that fed Jim’s adolescent fantasies. Jim wanted to rise up to a heroic status in his dream career in
sea. Conrad himself had once experienced a boyish desire for the world to be an ‘enchanted place’. Like his fictional other, Marlow, he too had gazed at a map in a shop window and vowed that one day he would go to the source of the Congo River (16-17). In Jim’s case one can find a tension between his desire, the dream, and its moment. Jim fails to act according to his ideal because when he reacts to the defining events of his life the necessities of the moment elude him. The various incidents that expose Jim’s ‘subtle unsoundness’ are linked to the act of jumping. His first missed opportunity occurs on the training ship when faced by an emergency- he fails to jump to the rescue. Later as an officer, he literally jumps ship by abandoning *Patna*, whereupon the glory that might have been his goes to the unassuming French lieutenant who brings it safely to the port .To Marlow’s amazement, Jim considers this moment of absolute disgrace as a missed opportunity. What is for Jim a symptomatic repetition is not represented directly in the novel but is merely reported by him in a way that plays down his agency: ‘I had jumped….it seems’ (111). Jim’s psychological flaw is that he lives out his passions through his fantasies that incapacitate him. The romantic heroism he rehearses in the serene and undemanding time of his daydreaming may well sustain him through the boring realities of his everyday life on board the ship. However, his fantasies also ensure that
he never encounters the real: as is evident in the narrative Jim is always destined to be too early or too late.

When he first fails to act heroically on board the training ship he is excusably young and it is a minor affair. However, his jump from the stricken *Patna* is an altogether different matter, both psychologically and ethically. For as soon as the fantasist becomes an officer, his psychic formation collides with the ideology of the merchant marine service. Before the emergency stirred him from his daydream existence and caused him to jump to safety, his mind may well have been alive with images of chaos, futility and reality gone crazy. At stake are not just the ‘code of honour’ of a sea man but also the rules of conduct for British imperial servants and this ‘code’ according to Fredric Jameson epitomizes the more elusive and potent ‘ideological cohesion of class values’ necessary for sustaining the empire (265). Just as Jim breached his own position of trust as a white officer on *Patna*, in 1942, the British would finally abandon Singapore in the face of the invading Japanese. That incident ended Britain’s moral authority in the East. It is notable that Conrad tries underscoring the nationality of the shame involved by making the unsung hero of the *Patna* episode a Frenchman, who brings the vessel and its eight hundred pilgrim passengers into safety.
The character of Brierly in the novel becomes significant here because his outrage that Jim’s dogged insistence on facing the Inquiry will expose the whites ‘out there’ to the disparaging gaze of the native population. However opaque its meaning, Brierly’s suicide has deep psychological and ideological connotations. Certainly the novel is so preoccupied with Jim, but Brierly is linked to Jim in many ways. He comes from the upper ranks of the same social world- the respectable and cultured ‘middle class English community detailed by Jane Austen and George Eliot in their fictions. As he informs Marlow:

I rather think some of my people know his. The old man’s a parson and I remember how I met him once when staying with my cousin in Essex last year. If I am not mistaken, the old chap seemed rather to fancy his sailor son. Horrible… (68)

In the very first chapter of the novel, Jim’s family home is described briefly, but critically. It is located in a world that has its own certain and hypocritical moral codes:

Jim’s father possessed such certain knowledge of the Unknowable as made for the righteousness of people in cottages without disturbing the ease of mind of those whom an unerring Providence enables to live in mansions. The little church on a hill
had the mossy grayness of a rock seen though a ragged screen of leaves. It had stood there for centuries… (5)

The family link between Jim and Brierly back in the old country indicates a kind of borderline where the fictional worlds of Austen and Conrad momentarily overlap. Austen chronicles the domestic and community life of the places that Fanny Price’s brother in *Mansfield Park* left in order to explore the great waterways of the earth. Jim is on a quest that takes him away from the settled world of his upbringing to distant countries that are beyond his ethical comprehension. However, in this context it is equally important to realize that Austen and Conrad travel in opposite directions in their respective fictional worlds. One reason why Captain Brierly attracts so little narrative attention is that he remains locked in the class values of the community that produced him, and from which Jim has made a break.

This complex novel associates Brierly with Jim in ways that are at once obvious and insidious. They both jump overboard, for instance. However, for Brierly, as captain of the ship, this is the most spectacular event in an otherwise unruffled and successful life. Whereas Jim’s suicide is merely symbolic, Brierly actually jumps to his death. Brierly perfectly exemplifies dedication to the code of service or to ‘a certain standard of conduct’ associated with it. His career has been a
masterpiece of effective commitment, and has lived a version of the
c fanciful style of male greatness popularized in those novels of adventure
that prompted Jim’s own fantasies:

He had never in his life made a mistake, never had an accident,
never a mishap, never had a check in his steady rise and he
seemed to be one of those lucky fellows, who know nothing of
indecision, much less of self-mistrust….he had saved lives at sea,
had rescued ships in distress, had a gold chronometer presented to
him by the underwriters, and a pair of binoculars with a suitable
inscription from some foreign Government, in commemoration of
these services. (57)

Unlike Jim’s imaginary heroics, Brierly’s actual
accomplishments are dryly pictured and read like a biographical note on
an achiever unaware of the heroism of his own life. He enters the novel
as he leaves it, almost unnoticed. Lord Jim typically infiltrates
significant new characters when the reader’s attention is fixed
elsewhere. As a result of this strategy, Brierly’s entrance lures readers
into participating in the metaphysical dilemmas of the characters
themselves. As a character that is unheralded and unnamed in the
earliest description of the Inquiry, Brierly is identified only by the quasi-
heroic phrase, ‘big assessor’. This glancing and indeterminate reference
is introduced revealingly at that point in the Inquiry when Jim, giving his version of the events that led him to abandon the *Patna* remarks as evidence of his seaman’s expertise: ‘I knew then there must be a big hole below the water-line’ (29). But the ‘big assessor’ cuts Jim short ‘with a dreamy smile’, while ‘his fingers played incessantly, touching the paper without noise’. The problem is not that this response conceals its meaning, but that it allows for too many interpretative possibilities. Here the secret allegiance of the text is not with Brierly and the Inquiry but with Jim’s impossible pursuit of true meaning, in all its intangible details and nuances. The Inquiry dealt merely with essential facts. The ethical tensions that pervade *Lord Jim* resemble those endless slippages of meaning that drive *Heart of Darkness*. Both attest to the impossibility of naming the supposedly ‘redeeming idea’ that lies behind ‘certain standards of conduct’ on the one hand and mercenary greed on the other. Brierly cannot bear either the public shame of the collapse of British moral authority in the East or the fact that Jim is ‘one of us’. It seems that Brierly’s sense of world order breaks down. From the perspective of Brierly’s own standards of conduct, his suicide is arguably more shameful than the behavior shown by Jim that triggers it. Brierly’s father excises all memory of his son after his suicide.
Like Kurtz, Jim exposes the fragility of the fantasies that feed imperial greatness. As truly Conradian heroes, they oblige us to reconfigure the grounds on which ethical judgments are made. Their lives reveal undiscovered depths in the human psyche, which is why the crowd of white spectators at the Inquiry expected some kind of revelation. Rather, Jim’s case instigates a seemingly endless pursuit after meaning, which generates Marlow’s project and is in turn the driving force of Conrad’s novel. The cynical and racist Brierly frankly admits to Marlow that he does not ‘care a snap for all the pilgrims that ever came out of Asia’ (68). However, this discourse of down-to-earth toughness emanates from an increasingly evasive and confused Brierly, who shortly afterwards commits suicide. By contrast, Jim – with the romantic goal of a heroic destiny entrenched among his fantasies – proves to be the more resilient. The paradox encodes a political insight that the empire is sustained by nostalgic daydreaming and the supposedly debilitating fantasies of popular culture, rather than by, Brierly- like show of stubbornness.

Jim gets his opportunity for redemption when Stein presents him with Patusan, because the opportunity answers to his need to gain honour by his own efforts. Although Conrad’s complex narrative style continues to present Jim’s buried existence through scattered glimpses,
the Patusan section is not marked by time shifts and verbal duplicity. Conrad here attempts to write a modern-day romance that resonates with the history of the White Rajahs of Sarawak. This apparent lapse into romance is offset by a strain of realism which acknowledges that such happy episodes occur only in the fantasy world of fiction and hence the novel’s tragic denouement. It is interesting to note that the character of Stein resembles the famous Orientalist, Alfred Russel Wallace, whose monumental study of the Malay Archipelago provided abundant source-material for Conrad’s early fictions as well as the Patusan section of *Lord Jim*. Like Stein, Wallace lived in an era that combined science with adventure, and which Conrad (as a person who wrote in gloomier times) regarded as both amateurish and idealistic. Wallace was a friend and house guest of the legendary James (or Rajah) Brooke, the man who was known as the benevolent protector of the Dyak peoples of Sarawak, and who founded the dynasty which ruled them for a hundred years. Brooke thus lived out in real life what was but a flawed dream for Jim. That Conrad’s attitude to the controversial Brooke was not only uncritical but also sentimental is evidenced by this eulogy from the opening chapter of *The Rescue*:

> The adventurers who began that struggle have left no descendents. The ideas of the world changed too quickly for that.
However, even into the present [i.e. nineteenth] century they have had successors. Almost in our own day we have seen one of them— a true adventurer in his devotion to his impulse— a man of high mind and of pure heart; lay the foundation of a flourishing state on the ideas of pity and justice. He recognized chivalrously the claims of the conquered; he was a disinterested adventurer, and the reward of his noble instincts is in the veneration with which a strange and faithful race cherishes his memory. Misunderstood and traduced in life, the glory of his achievement has vindicated the purity of his motives. He belongs to history. (3-4)

The nostalgic cadences of this ‘tribute’ reveals Conrad’s tendency to see the generation that immediately preceded his own as the final phase of a lost Golden age, when steamships had not yet displaced sail and undiscovered places on the world’s maps enticed the adventurous into exotic careers.

In presenting the Patusan story as a tragedy, Conrad finally reveals that Jim’s ‘flaw’ was permanently disabling. The stronger line of development in the novel, however, concerns the issue of his survival and an analysis of his desire and disgrace, the Tuan Jim/Rajah Brooke motif evokes the afterglow of romantic desire for an imaginary lost
world where ‘glamour’ is still possible. ‘The time was coming’, says Marlow, ‘when I should see him loved, trusted, admired, with a legend of strength and prowess forming round his name as though he had been the stuff of a hero’ (75). Although Jim turned out to be not quite a hero, Conrad’s own desultory hold on the possibility of heroism lasted until the final years of his life. Conrad received a warm letter of appreciation from the ‘Renee’ Margaret Brooke, wife of the second White Rajah of Sarawak, Sir Charles Brooke (who was nephew and heir of the first Rajah, Sir James Brooke), who wrote with deep local knowledge when describing *Lord Jim* as ‘the best book ever written about the island of the East Indies’ (Payne:710). Whereas Charles’ reign was contemporaneous with Conrad, James had lived in the ‘age of adventure’ that preceded it. Long estranged from her husband and finally widowed, Margaret Brooke became in her mature years the London friend and patroness of the most famous literary men of the day. Conrad replied to the letter sent to him by Margret Brooke:

I am immensely gratified and touched by the letter you have been good enough to write to me. The first Rajah Brooke has been one of my boyish admirations, a feeling I have kept to this day strengthened by the better understanding of greatness of his character and the unstained rectitude of his purpose. The book
which has found favor in your eyes has been inspired in great
measure by the history of the first Rajah’s enterprises.

(Payne: 720)

The extra- textual pairing of a fictional ‘Tuan’ Jim with Rajah
Brooke, who ‘belonged to history’, adds yet another layer of irony to
Lord Jim. Sir James Brooke, like his nephew and successor Charles, was
probably closer to Mr. Kurtz than to Jim, and ‘flawed’ in ways that
Conrad may not have known. For this White Rajah did not maintain his
power over the Dyaks by patiently weaning them off their ‘savage’ ways
in order to establish order. He did it by joining them on head- hunting
raids. Brookre’s methods- like that of Kurtz- were ‘unsound’, although
none of his family appears to have suffered a breakdown from remorse.

Conrad made several voyages to the French Antilles when
scarcely out of his teens. Besides, he claims to have glimpsed South
America and have been briefly in Venezuela. Only in the year before he
died did he set foot in the United States. Although his relations with the
Old World were somewhat equivocal, he was European enough to
distance himself from the New World. Without being exclusively Polish
or French or British he created in his writings a pan- European
perspective on the interconnections of its empires. Arguably the first
internationalist novelist, Conrad thought old European colonialism was
dying. But unlike D.H. Lawrence, he did not detect in the world around him the dawn of a new order.

Conrad’s earliest journey to ‘the Americas’ was literary and resulted in his masterpiece, *Nostromo* (1904). The epic scope and detached narrative perspective of what was at that time the least personal of his novels involved a great deal of self-distancing. He set *Nostromo* in an imaginary Latin American republic. According to Conrad’s Author’s Note of 1917, it was assembled out of a few personal memories from his time in Marseilles (1874-8) and much reading. While writing a novel that marginalizes British imperial power, Conrad himself was taking up permanent residence in the heartland of middle-class England. Set in what is strictly speaking a post-colonial Latin America, *Nostromo* describes the new forms of imperialism created by multinational capitalism and reveals how the demise of European colonialism does not prevent Empire from perpetuating itself. Long before colonialism of the old World had run its course, it describes on its furthest horizon the outline of a global economic system dominated by American capital.

The social and political realities of Costaguana are delineated in terms that go beyond the dualistic modeling of the relation between the coloniser and the colonised. In 1823, President James Monroe had not
only advised the Congress to remain aloof from Europe’s colonial wars but also insisted that Europe stay out of the Americas. The long-term effect of this policy was to authorize the United States to ‘manage’ Latin America. *Nostromo* catches that history on the very cusp of change, when American intervention in Panama happened to coincide with the construction of the canal (190-194). That event opened the way to more ‘new’ worlds. In the period in which Nostromo is set, the United States had neither completed the canal nor established its Canal Zone, although both events were shortly to happen. Situated on the Pacific side of South America, Costagunana is thus doubly removed for a little longer from the ‘mainstream’ of history.

Early in the novel, Charles Gould observes that ‘there’s a good deal of eloquence of one sort or another produced in both Americas’ (83). The critical edge of his remark can be felt once when one recalls Conrad’s mistrust of ‘eloquence’ in Kurtz’s infamous Report. An immediate referent is the humanitarian rhetoric of the millionaire businessperson, Holroyd:

> Now, what is Costaguana? It is the bottomless pit of 10 per cent. Loans and fool investments. European capital had been flung into both hands for years. Not ours, though. We in this country know just about enough to keep indoors when it rains. We can sit and
watch. Of course, someday we shall step in. We are bound to. However, there’s no hurry. Time itself has got to wait on the greatest country in the whole of God’s Universe. We shall be giving the word for everything: industry, law, journalism, art, politics, and religion, from Cape Horn clear over to Smith’s Sound, and beyond, too, if anything worth taking hold of turns up at the North Pole. And then we shall have the leisure to take in hand the outlaying islands and continents of the earth. We shall run the world’s business whether the world likes it or not. The world can’t help it—neither can we, I guess’ (76-77)

It is interesting to note that the mild fanaticism of this polite Christian businessman sounds a more foreboding note. Conrad’s satirical distancing of this new type of global exploiter is accompanied by the illuminating insight that the developments envisioned by Holroyd lie beyond the control of even ‘the greatest country in the whole of God’s Universe’. Holroyd anticipates something that world witnesses now: a self regulating global system that no individual or national agency can constrain. Its most recent and alarming manifestation is the inability of an all powerful United States to take moral responsibility for its interventions. *Nostromo* also contains the seeds of what was to become the world –systems analysis and subsequently the globalization
theory. Conrad remained skeptical of America for the rest of his life. In October 1922 he told Bertrand Russell – who had just published a book on *The Problem of China* - that his deductions ‘strike a chill into one’s soul especially when you deal with the American element. That would indeed be a dreadful fate for China or any other country.’ (396)

Political discussions of *Nostromo* often repeat the familiar criticism made against *Heart of Darkness*: namely, that it is unclear where Conrad ‘stands’ on the question of imperialism, and where his sympathies lie. Even one of his greatest admirers, the late Edward Said, criticizes *Nostromo* for ‘embodying the same paternalistic arrogance of imperialism that it mocks through (in) characters like Gould and Holroyd.’ (20) What Said objects to – the idea that native Latin Americans have no culture of their own, and are incapable of governing themselves or even responding to any form of governance – is certainly a disabling prejudice. To quote from *Nostromo*, “The heritage of South America is, ‘as the great liberator Bolivar had said in the bitterness of his spirit....’America is ungovernable. Those who worked for her independence have ploughed the sea’.” (186).

In the novel, it is not the narrator but the skeptical Martin Decoud who quotes the ‘liberator’, Bolivar and his reflection follows an intense argument with his beloved Antonia, Costaguana’s quintessential
‘patriot’. In other words, Bolivars’ remark is rhetorical and dramatical and its exact political meaning is found not in the words themselves but in the context.

The question of what Conrad ‘himself’ might have thought of these matters is perfectly reasonable. However, before it can be put, the context of any observation attributable to Conrad needs to be borne in mind. The disparaging and racist sentiments that come from Bolivar are enclosed within Decoud’s narration, which in turn is enclosed within Conrad’s novel. The critical distancing achieved by this framing devise is both a function of Nostromo’s acknowledged breadth of vision and a warning that superficial analysis will not reveal the complexity of Conrad’s politics. The novels first reference to the success of Monterist rebellion – the sad Ribiera’s escape by donkey – is often taken to show how skeptical Conrad was about all forms of political hope. A sense that political idealism is ultimately futile, combined with Conrad’s supposed counter-revolutionary tendencies, could be the final ‘message’ of Nostromo.

As Conrad’s only major colonial novel after Nostromo that returns to the exotic East of his earlier fictions, Victory unexpectedly represents his final and most far reaching insight into the meaning of late imperialism. Conrad places at the centre of the novel a paradoxical
figure who is against the popular mode of life. Axel Heyst is at once a hermit and the last word in ‘consummate politenesses. Alone in the silence of his lonely island, he meditates on the futility of action. Both the business of colonialism and its effects on the colonised ‘natives’ are banished to the periphery of the text, which contemplates instead an individual life paralysed at a very early stage and henceforth committed programatically to non-action.

The novel opens with a commentary on a failed capitalist adventure. Simultaneously trenchant and facetious, its very first paragraph touches deftly on ‘commodities’, ‘wealth’, ‘property’, and ‘finance’, but in a tone calculated to deflect attention away from such matters. Its apparent carelessness then became a sign that the novel should be read not for its truth to everyday reality but as some sort of allegory. The story of Heyst and Lena can be read plausibly either as melodrama of the seduction of an innocent working girl by an aristocrat or antithetically as a modern version of the fairy-tale story of a poor girl saved by a Prince charming. Although the moral meaning of each interpretation virtually cancels out the other, textual evidence can be found to support either reading. From a longer perspective, *Victory* might also be seen as a rewriting of the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, the Eden of the novel being the tropical island of Samburan. It is a
suitable location for any of these plots, partly because the colonised East is a good place for ‘going native’, which means investing libidinally in its transgressive and guilt inducing excitements. The repressed themes of sin and sexuality, which are either pushed to the edges of the text or transmuted into melodrama, enable the genesis story of flawed innocence to be fused with nineteenth century tales of exotic adventure.

A pivotal moment in *Victory* evokes a sombre relationship with the European past. Very near the centre of the novel, Axel Heyst is found meditating among the ruins of the Tropical Belt Coal Company. The narrator comments: “A meditation is always –in a white man, at least - more or less an interrogative exercise” (173). This observation introduces a chapter that is itself a kind of meditation – not just of the white man’s kind. Its scenes, which emanate from dispersed times and locations, are as vivid –and elusively connected with one another as in a dream. Heyst leaves the amazing situation he finds himself in at present –living with a woman on a desert island-and revisits a moment of desertion in the past, when he bemusedly superintended the demise of the Tropical Belt Coal Company. The first half of this chapter is dominated by the remembered scene of his father’s death; the second, by his meeting with Wang. The death of the father takes place in the heart of London, whose ‘houses began to look like the tombs of an unvisited,
unhonoured, cemetery of hopes’ (174). His father is remembered as ‘the silenced destroyer of systems, of hopes, of beliefs’ (175). The sad and lonely room where they had the last of their many talks is contrasted with the anonymous and amorphous street below. The unheeding ‘begrimed shadows of the town’ recall the London of *The Secret Agent* with its crowded, impersonal intensities. They contrast with Axel Heyst’s barren grief in the austere and refined atmosphere of the dying man’s room:

> [a] few slow tears rolled down his face. The rooms, filling with shadows, seemed haunted by a melancholy, uneasy presence which could not express itself. The young man got up with a strange sense of making way for something impalpable that claimed possession, went out of the house, and locked the door.

> A fortnight later he started on his travels – to ‘look on and never make a sound’. (176)

Heyst did not find it quite easy to shut the door on his past. His attempt to become a settler in Samburan coincides with the expiration of the lease on his father’s London house. When Heyst transports the ‘objects familiar to his childhood’ to the tropical island where he now lives, he becomes a ‘man among ruins’ not only of his father’s library but also of the intellectual traditions it embodies. Yet by disconnecting
the past from the present, Heyst’s emigration has changed the terms of his existence. His enduring but ambiguous presence at Samburan prompts island gossip, although it also produces one sympathetic response in the form of Davidson’s discreet and solicitous visitations to the island.

Wang ‘materializes’ from the ruins of the Tropical Belt Coal Company. One of the Chinese ‘coolies’ brought in to set up the enterprise; he alone has decided to stay on with Heyst. His first appearance in the novel hints at how important he will become for defining Conrad’s responses to imperialism: ‘Of the crowd of imported Chinese laborers, one at least had remained in Samburan, solitary and strange, like a swallow left behind at the migrating season of his tribe’ (178). Psychologically, Wang appears to be very different from Heyst, even though he too lives on the island with his women. While respecting both the secrets of Wang’s nuptials and his ‘strong personal views as to the manner of arranging his domestic existence’ (180), Heyst regards his Chinese ‘boy’ as someone totally removed from his own experience. The Chinaman’s intensity of purpose amazes him: ‘Looking silently at the silent Wang going about his work in the bungalow in his unhasty, steady way, Heyst envied the Chinaman’s obedience to his instincts’ (181). Whether or not Conrad intended the ‘victory’ in the novel to be
Wang’s, its narrative structure allows that possibility. Wang remains on the island with his ‘native’ wife after the various European masters and their assisting officers have safely departed. His commitment to the traditional inhabitants of Samburan suggests that Asian solidarity has outlasted the excesses of European adventure and romance. In dismissing Western ‘material interests’ such as the Tropical Belt Coal Company, Conrad certainly takes into account their weird tendencies:

Company promoters have an imagination of their own. There’s no more romantic temperament on earth than the temperament of a company promoter. Engineers came out, coolies were imported; bungalows were put up on Samburan, a gallery driven onto the hillside, and actually some coal got out. (24)

In their ambiguous relationship with one another, similarities between Heyst and Wang are more important than differences. Shifting affiliations between individual characters and groups make it difficult to determine the exact nature of Conrad’s colonial politics. In this case, for example, Wang’s ‘victory’ is not that of the colonised over the coloniser, because Conrad does not construct the Malay Archipelago in those binary terms. Wang’s own history before coming to Samburan makes him as much an intruder there as Heyst. In marrying a local woman he encounters some hostility from the Alfuros, who had been
‘frightened by the sudden invasion of Chinamen’ (179). Part of the great Chinese diaspora of the past two centuries, Wang is a displaced person whose migrant experience links him to Heyst.

The novel holds ample scope for allegorical or archetypal reading. This can have the effect of subordinating Conrad’s novel to what Eagleton calls ‘the immobilizing perspectives of myth’ (Eagleton 131). One such invitation emanates from Heyst himself, when at a pivotal moment of the novel, he declares: ‘there must be a lot of the original Adam in me, after all’ (173). Descended from that ‘first ancestor’ Heyst exercises the Adamic prerogative of naming his women Lena. The elder Heyst gloomily bequeathed to his son an unshakably negative interpretation of life even before the young Heyst had much experience of it. Like Adam, Heyst is told what to avoid; like Adam he succumbs to the temptation of a woman and therefore must relive the myth of the fall on his paradisiacal island. Readers wary of identifying Heyst too closely with his author should remember that Conrad himself first raised that possibility. In the Author’s Note to the novel, he writes of the ‘nearness of the book, its nearness to me personally, to the vanished mood in which it was written’ (8). And, as in Conrad’s case, Heyst’s orphaning did not cause his migratory existence, during which he felt neither completely rooted in his enchanted circle of islands at the
outskirts of the colonial world nor sufficiently liberated to escape from it. Both the deracination experienced on becoming an orphan and his later wanderings in exile are simply seen as two variations on the basic paradigm of separation and loss. This complex pattern of deracinated existences is what gives *Victory* its modern feel, making it a postcolonial novel in all senses. However, it also deals with the experience of fractured memories because of migration. A strong reading of *Victory*, which seeks political rather than allegorical meanings, must begin by recognizing that the planting of mythical allusions in the text is a narrative strategy whose effect is to confuse rather than to illuminate the text at a whole.

The island romance theme, which delicately explores Heyst’s sexual relationship with Lena, is just one element in a novelistic experiment that demands rapid shifts of attention by readers. It must be noted that the choice of setting the love story is in the exotic East. It must also be noted that the love story is not inter-racial. It does not follow on those stories of ‘going native’ that Conrad had explored in his earliest novels, which are also set in the Malay Archipelago. Lena is to Heyst ‘a script in an unknown language’ (222). Her tone betrayed always a shade of anxiety, as though she were never certain how a conversation with him would end’ (186). Their close relationship
involves a close encounter with language that, in Heyst’s case, dismantles the ‘finished’ courtesy that shields him against the world. One has to read their verbal misunderstandings with a sympathy that comes from a wider perspective than they themselves have on the seemingly random shifts of their dialogue. Although they appear completely safe from external threats, Heyst and Lena experience a mutual distress that is organized in such a way as to obscure the question that Lena had once put casually to Heyst, and to which their conversation intermittently returns: ‘Why are you here?’ (194). The nearest Heyst comes to a direct answer is to reiterate his life story: his father’s influence, the meeting with Morrison, what happened at Shomberg’s hotel, and so forth. Heyst’s re-reading of what the reader already knows is not only fascinating but also a clear indication of the small but significant space that separates him from his author. Conrad maintains a critical distance from Heyst’s inability to answer directly Lena’s profound and simple question: ‘Why are you here?’

The seriousness of Lena’s innocent question is manifest when a boatload of strangers arrives on the island. What disturbs Heyst is that they are white men. Why are they here, he might well ask. He suddenly experiences, without recognizing it as such, the lost originary moment of a history of imperialism written by the vanquished: the shock of
something like the premonitory fear felt by ‘the natives’ on seeing Europeans for the first time.

Their apparition in a boat Heyst could not connect with anything plausible. The civilization of the tropics could have had nothing to do with it. It was more like those myths, current in Polynesia, of amazing strangers, who arrive at an island, gods or demons, bringing good or evil to the innocence of the inhabitants—gifts of unknown things, words never heard before. (227-8)

Confronted by these visitants half-dead in their boat, Heyst fails to ask them the question that Lena had asked him, and which might have devastated immediately their designs on his supposed riches: ‘Why are you here?’ When Wang steals his revolver, Heyst misrecognizes the situation so badly as to feel more threatened by Wang than by the ‘amazing strangers’. His assessment of the situation is pathetically colonialist: ‘Wang would hardly risk such a crime in the presence of other white men’ (257).

For both Lena and the ‘enchanted’ Heyst, these islands and waterways are a nameless non-place, a simple setting for life’s adventures. The lovers inhabit only one side of the island. On the other side—barricaded from them by a symbolic ‘jungle’—live villagers engaged in an island economy that lies beyond the ken of the former
manager of the Tropical Belt Coal Company. Heyst and Lena are sympathetic characters only for as long as *Victory* remains a love story. As soon as it moves on to the suppressed narrative of colonialism, they must be unmasked as unconscious racists incapable of relating to the place they live in. Their profoundly Eurocentric world-view, which appears only fleetingly in inconsequential snatches of dialogue, is exemplified in Heyst’s brief explanation to Lena of Wang’s presence on the island:

“He has been tidying the place in this labor-saving way”, explained Heyst, without looking at the girl, whose hand rested on his forearm.

“He’s the whole establishment, you see. I told you hadn’t even a dog to keep me company here.”

Wang had marched off towards the wharf.

“He’s like those waiters in that place,” she said. That place was Schomberg’s hotel.

“One Chinaman looks very much like another,” Heyst remarked.

“We shall find it very useful to have him here . . . .” (182)

The Racist attitudes of Heyst and Lena appear benign here. Besides, Conrad positions his readers in such a way that they barely notice it. But at this moment of crisis for Heyst, our narrative
assumptions are profoundly destabilized. Wang, who had been observed ‘under Western eyes’ and labeled unobtrusive, suddenly emerges as a person in his own right, with a consciousness whose history is non-European:

His Chinaman’s mind very clear but not far-reaching, was made up according to the plain reason of things, such as it appeared to him in the light of his simple feeling for self-preservation, untrammeled by any notions of romantic honour or tender conscience. The graves of Wang’s ancestors were far away, his parents were dead, and his elder brother was a soldier in the yamen of some Mandarin away in Formosa. No one nearby had claim on his veneration or his obedience. (307)

From this point on, the text follows a different colour in its representation of Wang. The reinvention of wang as something other than an object of the colonial gaze highlights Victory’s radical departure from Conrad’s earlier novels. The transformation of Wang from a stage Chinaman into an active participant in the real world of action reveals enough of his life to show by contrast the fatal limitations of Heyst’s worldview. Like Jones, he is also Heyst’s double. With the graves of his ancestors far away, his parents dead, and no one nearby (apart from one woman) with any claim on his veneration or his obedience, he lives out
on the island a more authentic version of Heyst’s orphaned life as a migrant. Its melodramatic finale is played out in the breathless scene of Lena’s great sacrifice and in Wang’s more modest contribution to the debate over action and value by shooting Pedro. The ideal resolution of the tensions that the novel has negotiated so boldly will only become possible in a postcolonial world.