

Formed by Place: Spatiality, Irony, and Empire in Conrad's 'An Outpost of Progress'

Thais Rutledge and Robert T. Tally Jr.

Abstract

In its ironic narrative and distinctive geography, Joseph Conrad's 1897 short story 'An Outpost of Progress' is well suited for geocritical analysis, insofar as Conrad demonstrates the degree to which space and place affect both the characters in the story and style of the text. Focusing on the unique setting – the 'outpost' – in which the events take place, we argue that Conrad's tale employs an ironic narrator in order to highlight the tale's distinctive spatiality, particularly with respect to a geopolitical system that too neatly divides the spaces of the globe into civilised and barbaric regions. The spatiality of 'An Outpost of Progress' can be seen in the geographical aspects of the narrative, with the specific site or heterotopia of the 'outpost' situated at the edge of a territory coded as 'barbaric' or 'uncivilised,' thus connecting the colonised domain in central Africa to the metropolitan society of northwestern Europe, largely unseen, but implicitly present throughout the story. But this spatiality may also be observed in its formal or stylistic elements, especially in the point of view and voice of the narrator, as the perspective shifts from omniscient overseer to ironic commentator and then to a free indirect style in which the distance between narrator and subject is dramatically reduced. In this way, Conrad produces an ironic, spatial narrative that highlights, in both content and form, the absurdity of the imperialist 'civilising mission' in Africa.

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Early in Joseph Conrad's 1897 short story 'An Outpost of Progress,' the director of the 'Great Trading Company' marvels at the incompetence of Kayerts and Carlier, who had been appointed to manage a remote trading station. 'Look at those two imbeciles,' he remarks to his servant aboard the steamer as they are departing. 'They must be mad at home to send me such specimens. ... I always thought the station on this river useless, and they fit the station!' With 'a quiet smile,' the servant responds, 'They will form themselves there.'¹ This cryptic remark resonates throughout the story, as the reader watches the inept station manager and his assistant become ever more dull, lazy, irritable, immoral, and ultimately murderous. Although the narrator's depiction of them, along with the director's initial assessment, leave little doubt as to the men's thoroughly low character even upon arriving at the station, one might agree with the old servant that they 'form themselves' in this particular place. Indeed, the 'outpost' determines the shape of these characters during the six or more months of their residency there, and the irony of its 'progress' is strongly connected to the station's spatiotemporal position, its location in both geography and history, as Conrad's ironic narrator almost revels in observing. In both its

¹ Joseph Conrad, 'An Outpost of Progress,' in *Tales of Unrest*, eds. Allan H. Simmons and J.H. Stape (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 79; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

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form and its content, the spatial narrative of 'An Outpost of Progress' offers a compelling case for the ways in which place or space determines character.

In its ironic narrative and distinctive geography, 'An Outpost of Progress' is ripe for a sort of geocritical analysis, insofar as Conrad demonstrates the degree to which space and place affect both the characters in the story and style of the text.² Focusing on the unique setting – the 'outpost' – in which the events take place, we argue that Conrad's tale employs an ironic narrator in order to highlight the distinctive spatiality of the narrative, particularly with respect to a geopolitical system that too neatly divides the spaces of the globe into civilised and barbaric regions. The spatiality of 'An Outpost of Progress' can be seen in the geographical aspects of the narrative. The specific site or heterotopia of the 'outpost' situated at the edge of a territory coded as 'barbaric' or 'uncivilised,' thus connecting the colonised domain in central Africa to the metropolitan society of northwestern Europe, largely unseen, but implicitly present throughout the story. But the tale's spatiality may also be observed in its formal or stylistic elements, especially in the point of view and voice of the narrator, as the perspective shifts from omniscient overseer to ironic commentator, then employing a free indirect style in which the distance between narrator and subject is dramatically cut short. In this way, Conrad produces an ironic, spatial narrative that highlights, in both content and form, the absurdity of the imperialist 'civilising mission' in Africa.

In its use of foregrounding, interior dialogue, and narrative commentary, Conrad's style itself indicates the complex spatial organisation of 'An Outpost of Progress.' Drawing on the insights of recent work in spatial literary studies, we read Conrad's story as a spatial narrative that combines a literary cartography of a representative location in Africa with an ironic perspective on the colonial system at large, while also exploring the psychological spaces of its characters, especially Kayerts and Carlier. Conrad's critique of the 'civilising' rationale of imperialist conquest and exploitation is thus tied to the interior and exterior spaces of the system in which it flourishes. The distinctive narrative voice in 'An Outpost of Progress' functions as perhaps an even more significant presence than the characters, as it persistently engages its targets in satirical critique. As Lawrence Graver notes, the tale is 'a work of ruthless belligerence,' and he adds that

its interest rests less in the people than in the quality of the narrator's attack. The targets themselves are worth aiming at (greed masquerading as philanthropy and colonizers shielded from their natural impulses by the dead hand of custom), and the assault is carried off with verve and decisiveness.³

This engaged narrative voice is also evidence of the tale's spatiality, for it expands or contracts the distances between the reader and various characters in revealing the nature of this distinctive place and its effects on those who occupy it. Just as Kayerts and Carlier 'form themselves' in that place, Conrad's ironic narrative shows how a colonial system informs modern consciousness of spatial and social organisation.

² See Bertrand Westphal, *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, trans. Robert T. Tally Jr. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). In this essay, we do not follow Westphal's 'geo-centered' methodology, but refer to a geocritical practice understood in a broader sense that would include various spatially oriented approaches to literature.

³ Lawrence Graver, *Conrad's Short Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 11.

Conrad and the Spatial Turn

As a number of critics and theorists have acknowledged, the humanities and social sciences have witnessed a 'spatial turn' in recent decades, as more scholars have begun to pay attention to matters of space, place, and mapping in relation to social and cultural studies. This turn has not only meant a heightened awareness of space or geography, but has involved, in the words of Barney Warf and Santa Arias, 'a reworking of the very notion and significance of spatiality to offer a perspective in which space is every bit as important as time in the unfolding of human affairs.'⁴ Space matters, 'not for the trivial and self-evident reason that everything occurs in space, but because *where* events unfold is integral to *how* they take shape.'⁵ The impetus for the reassertion of spatiality in critical theory and practice can be traced to several developments, including postcolonial criticism's revisionary rewriting of imperial master narratives, the poststructuralist critique of historicism, theories and practices of postmodernism, the displacements and mobility of populations in the twentieth century, advances in telecommunications and other technology, and the development of a more pertinaciously global economic and political system, to name a few. As Robert T. Tally Jr. has pointed out, 'The spatial turn in literary and cultural studies is both a reasonable response to the perplexities of this condition and a tentative exploration of new spaces and representations.'⁶

Not surprisingly, perhaps, Conrad's writings have maintained a privileged place in spatial literary studies. In Conrad's nonfiction, as in his 1921 essay 'Geography and Some Explorers,' mapmaking and exploration are considered crucial elements of modern social formations, and Conrad dramatises this sense effectively in *Heart of Darkness*, as when Marlow discusses his youthful enthusiasm for map-gazing, along with his excitement over the map of Africa he had seen in the Company's offices in Brussels.⁷ Moreover, Conrad is probably the most significant artist for Edward W. Said in his 'geographical inquiry into historical experience', *Culture and Imperialism*, in which a nuanced projection and interpretation of 'Two Visions in *Heart of Darkness*' becomes the exemplary model for Said's 'contrapuntal' method of reading.⁸ Christopher GoGwilt's meticulous postcolonial readings of Conrad's works have paid close attention to the relations between space, place, empire, and narrative. In *The Invention of the West*, for example, GoGwilt explicitly connects the use of cartographic language or mapping metaphors with the crisis of representation that corresponds to the age of imperialism and the imaginary geography of 'All Europe', not to mention the far-flung territories under European control.⁹ Con Coroneos, in *Space, Conrad, and Modernity*, investigates in detail the author's cautious navigation between 'the space of things and the space of words' in his diverse body of work.¹⁰ More recently, in 'Joseph Conrad and the Epistemology of Space', John G. Peters argues convincingly for the pervasive spatiality of Conrad's entire canon – Peters had previously analysed the distinctive space of Russia in *Under Western Eyes* – as he demonstrates the manner in which subjective space in Conrad leads to questions of knowledge in general, which in turn

⁴ Barney Warf and Santa Arias, 'Introduction: The Reinsertion of Space in the Humanities and Social Sciences,' in *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. Barney Warf and Santa Arias (London: Routledge, 2008), 1.

⁵ Warf and Arias 10.

⁶ Robert T. Tally Jr., *Spatiality* (London: Routledge, 2013), 43.

⁷ See Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 3rd ed., ed. Ross C. Murfin (New York: Bedford / St. Martin's, 2011), 22, 45.

⁸ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 7, 19–31.

⁹ Christopher GoGwilt, *The Invention of the West: Joseph Conrad and the Double-Mapping of Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 121.

¹⁰ Con Coroneos, *Space, Conrad, and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 16.

points to the conclusion that all knowledge is contingent, dependent on the spatiotemporal context in which it is experienced.¹¹ Generally speaking, then, Conrad's writings remain important sites for exploration by geocritics and other spatially oriented scholars.

'An Outpost of Progress,' however, seems to be lightly regarded by such critics. For instance, Coroneos mentions the story only once, in passing, and even then he is merely quoting another's citation.¹² Graver views it as 'static and derivative', a Kipling-esque story by a 'writer handling materials that he has not yet made his own.'¹³ Indeed, as Louis-Anthony Martinez has observed, the story is 'often considered of secondary importance', particularly since its main themes are generally believed to be revisited, but more elegantly or more powerfully, in *Heart of Darkness*, published just two years later.¹⁴ Although it too explores the experiences of colonialism, civilization, and alienation, 'An Outpost of Progress' is hardly an early draft of the subsequent novella. Conrad places two white, ostensibly 'civilised' men, Kayerts and Carlier, in an unfamiliar territory deep in the interior of what would seem to them to be a savage land. Their presence is itself supposed to be a sign of the civilising 'progress' sardonically alluded to in the title. The narrator takes pains to demonstrate the irony of the situation, as, for example, when the narrator facetiously refers to 'the Great Civilizing Company,' which was earlier called the Great Trading Company, and then adds, parenthetically, 'since we know civilization follows trade' (99). Here there is no fictional intermediary, a character like Marlow, who can interpret what he has seen for the audience, and the foolish civil servants Kayerts and Carlier do not in any way resemble the magnificent and terrible Mr Kurtz. Additionally, in 'An Outpost of Progress,' Conrad narrows the geographical scope of the tale to a discrete space, that of the outpost itself, and examines its effects upon these characters. By extension, Conrad's ironic narrative indicates the degree to which a place shapes one's character, which is as true in the 'civilised' parts of Europe as it is in the colonial outposts of Africa. A geocritical reading of 'An Outpost of Progress' discloses the significance of both the exterior, geographical place and the interior or mental space in connection to the broader geopolitical system Conrad explores.

In 'An Outpost of Progress,' Conrad engages in a literary cartography of the 'outpost,' even if the exact location – presumably a station along the Congo River, but in any case, a place 'deep' in central Africa – remains unnamed directly. One could assert that storytelling is itself a form of mapmaking, and hence that literary cartography is an integral part of the function of narrative.¹⁵ Not only does literature provide the landscapes and contours of a fictional world, but in viewing the writer as a figurative mapmaker, one sees and understands a work's distinctive spatial aspects. True, this cartography is mostly metaphorical. It is not merely a matter of describing spaces or places; it also characterises the style in which the narrative unfolds, as the form of the narrative determines the 'space' disclosed in it. The events in the world, whether historical or cultural, are driving forces which may themselves transform modern rhetoric. Much in the same way that the cartographer creates maps which can then be used to prevent individuals from being

¹¹ See John G. Peters, 'Joseph Conrad and the Epistemology of Space,' *Philosophy and Literature* (forthcoming); we are grateful to Professor Peters for sharing an advance copy of this article with us. See also Peters, 'The Space of Russia in Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*,' in *Literary Cartographies: Spatiality, Representation, and Narrative*, ed. Robert T. Tally Jr. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 89–109.

¹² Coroneos 101.

¹³ Graver 14.

¹⁴ Louis-Anthony Martinez, 'The Neutralization of Dichotomies in "An Outpost of Progress,"' *L'epoque conradienne* 38 (2013), 59.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Peter Turchi, *Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer* (San Antonio: Triity University Press, 2014).

lost, the writer functions as a mapmaker, and one of the principal tasks is to prevent his readers from getting lost in their imagined world. The crisis of representation associated with modernity (and postmodernity) is tied to the radical spatiotemporal and social transformations of the modern era, which Conrad registers in his own turn-of-the-century fiction.¹⁶ Like cartographers, writers have to choose what to include in their stories, and what to leave out. Of course, ‘real’ mapmakers do not have any say about the relative truth of the actual geospace figured on their maps; if, for example, they choose not to depict a mountain or lake on their map, that does not mean the mountain or lake doesn’t exist in the ‘real world’. However, the map – like the literary text – might work well without these details, depending on its functions and uses. (Road maps, for instance, frequently omit topographical details unrelated to the needs of motorists.) A writer arguably has even more freedom, since the willing suspension of disbelief might allow readers to forgive a patently ‘unrealistic’ literary map. They create new places and spaces; they decide how a story must function; they determine what should be part of their stories and how it will affect their readers. In so doing, they construct an image of the world of the narrative, effectively plotting the spaces inhabited by the characters and in which the events take place. In most cases, understandably, there is a clear sense of referentiality by which the places depicted in the narrative are more or less correlated to the ‘real-and-imagined’ places of the world.

Needless to say, a proficiency in literary cartography does not necessarily require extensive knowledge of or training in the geographical sciences. As Zdzisław Najder observed with some surprise, Conrad himself failed his ‘Day’s Work’ exam, a test of navigation and geography in which one must determine a ship’s position, speed, and so forth based on log entries over a 24-hour period.¹⁷ Navigation is not quite the same as geography, and Najder suggests that a weakness in mathematics and perhaps language may have been factors, but it is also true that the cartographic impulse is felt most keenly by one who is lost, and the well-designed map does not always provide solutions. Conrad is a gifted literary cartographer, but that does not mean that evidence of a spatial or cartographic anxiety does not persist in his writings. As Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle notes in their *Cartographies of the Absolute*, ‘among the first products of a genuine striving for orientation is disorientation, as proximal coordinates come to be troubled by wider, and at times overwhelming vistas.’¹⁸ Arguably, Conrad’s style, as well as the content of his narratives, respond to the challenges of this sense of disorientation in a modern, increasingly interconnected world system.

Like other writers of his era, Conrad was attuned to the spatial disruptions and desire for clarifying maps, but in his attention to the distant places outside of his readers’ common experience, Conrad’s writings are especially well suited to depicting the diverse spaces of the planet. ‘An Outpost of Progress,’ which recounts only a brief episode in the history of geographic empire, nevertheless offers a perfect example of Conrad’s literary cartography.

The Heterotopia of the Outpost

‘An Outpost of Progress’ might be considered a spatial narrative for several reasons, but most obviously it is a story in which Conrad introduces his readers to a distinctive and exotic place:

¹⁶ See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 279–280.

¹⁷ See Zdzisław Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Life*, trans. Halina Najder (Rochester: Camden House, 2007), 100–101, 108–109.

¹⁸ Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute* (Alresford, Hants: Zero Books, 2015), 25.

the *outpost*. This new space represents a distant and remote station within a colonised territory at a particular moment, presumably, King Leopold's Congo in the 1890s. According to Norman Sherry, the story was originally to have been titled 'A Victim of Progress'.¹⁹ Hence, in changing the name, Conrad highlights the way that the place itself, rather than one or more of the protagonists, features as the main theme of the story. The story is less about Kayerts, Carlier, or even Henry Price, and more about the location in which their fates are decided. At the beginning of the tale, the reader is introduced to the men who are to manage this outpost, Kayerts and Carlier, who represent 'civilised' Europeans, although they are also introduced as utterly incompetent and ill-suited to the task. Sherry notes that Conrad himself had travelled with a commercial agent named Alphonse Keyaerts to Stanley Falls in 1890, and the captain of that steamer was named Carlier.²⁰ Whether these characters were modelled on them directly or Conrad merely borrowed the names, the Kayerts and Carlier of 'An Outpost of Progress' are depicted in an almost wholly negative light. Each is deeply flawed, with questionable motives and goals. As noted above, the managing director of the Trading Company, their nominal supervisor, is fairly disgusted by their stupidity and incompetence, characteristics that Conrad's narrator foregrounds right at the beginning of the narrative. It is clear that their character is both suited to the place – a 'useless' outpost, as the director calls it – and likely to be made worse by dwelling there.

At first, the men appear to have high hopes about their new job and both glow with pride at being part of the civilising mission in this savage territory. Moreover, they do not see much value in the various people around them, including the friendly native Gobila and their officious assistant Henry Price, also known as Makola. They care only about trade, or rather, about their own professional success in running this trading station, and they take for granted their superiority over anyone else at the outpost. In 'Conrad's Irony: "An Outpost of Progress" and *The Secret Agent*', Gail Fraser observes that 'Conrad can view his protagonists with aloof detachment because they represent a society determined to sacrifice ethical values for material profit.'²¹ However, after a few months of being so far away from civilisation, Kayerts and Carlier's characteristics and behaviour change.

Kayerts and Carlier, who are revealed to be the products of an advanced European civilisation, with the ironic sense that such a designation inevitably entails, are placed in charge of the trading station, an outpost that is an important asset of the colonial power. As they become acquainted with one another, Kayerts and Carlier exchange personal stories. Because of their boastful personalities and arrogance towards each other and those around them, it does not take readers much to foresee the demise of both men. While at the outpost, Kayerts and Carlier believe themselves superior to all others. With such mentality, they do not take the 'respectful position' seriously. Rather, they lounge on the porch, smoke tobacco, and watch as the strikingly named Henry Price performs the daily labor involved in maintaining the trading station. What is more, both men wait for members of a nearby tribe to supply them with food, mediated by the amiable Gobila. In a crucial turn of events, they unwittingly allow Henry Price to broker a sale of human slaves – that is, a number of Gobila's tribesmen – in exchange for ivory, and Kayerts and Carlier's greed and desire for professional advancement overcome their scruples with respect to human bondage. At first, they are outraged by Price's actions, but they are mollified

¹⁹ Norman Sherry, *Conrad's Western World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 125.

²⁰ Sherry 21, 43.

²¹ Gail Fraser, 'Conrad's Irony: "An Outpost of Progress" and *The Secret Agent*,' *The Conradian* 11.2 (November 1986), 155–156.

by the thought of how pleased their superiors would be when they discover the profits. This event challenges their sense of their own moral superiority, but each character attempts to put the sinful act out of his mind. After many months of isolation, life at the outpost becomes monotonous. Kayerts and Carlier irritate one another; they become fickle, and like children, they begin to fight over minor possessions. During a row over whether to use or to preserve their remaining sugar, both men lose control of their emotions. Overcome with fear and desperation Kayerts takes his pistol and shoots Carlier in what seemed to be self-defence, only to discover that Carlier did not have a weapon. In his great agitation and anxiety, a moment in which ‘death and life had in a moment become equally difficult and terrible’ (96), Kayerts realises that he had killed an unarmed man. ‘Contemplating his future within a shadow of unrelieved darkness,’ as Said puts it in *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*, ‘Kayerts takes his own life.’²² This is where the managing director of the Great Trading Company, returning after six months, finds him, hanging from a leather strap from the cross atop the former station director’s grave.²³

A similar theme is sounded in *Heart of Darkness*, published shortly after ‘An Outpost of Progress.’ There Conrad, once again, plays with the motif of imperialism as he places Marlow in a remote and largely unknown region. Recounting his tale years later, Marlow inexorably steams up the Congo River in search of Mr Kurtz, a man whose geographical incursion into unfamiliar regions ostensibly entails a historic mission, to bring civilisation into the dark areas of the globe. The infamous *mission civilisatrice*, which Marlow himself alludes to in his famous soliloquy on ‘the conquest of the earth’, was part of the ideological justification for the colonisation of the Congo (among other places) from the start. When King Leopold acquired the Congo, he scheduled a meeting in Brussels to announce his reasons for invading the unknown territory: ‘to open to civilization the only part of our globe where Christianity has not yet penetrated and to pierce the darkness which envelops the entire population.’²⁴ Like Kayerts and Carlier before him, but with a much greater and more terrifying efficaciousness, Kurtz reveals a significant change in behaviour after months of isolation. With incisive irony, Conrad discloses the hypocrisy of those who consider themselves ‘pioneers of progress’ even as they engage in horrific atrocities.²⁵ In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad’s irony is leavened with pathos, as well as a broader sense of the human condition, but the author’s critique of the civilising mission of imperialism is clearly on display in ‘An Outpost of Progress.’ Using a variety of narrative techniques, including realistic description, editorial commentary, irony, and free indirect style, Conrad attempts to expose the violence, brutality, rapacity, and selfish greed that lay behind the rhetoric of the civilising mission. In so doing, he demonstrates that nearly all involved with the imperial project, from exalted leaders to hired functionaries, are corrupted by the enterprise.

In ‘An Outpost of Progress’, the particular site in which this all takes place is notable. The outpost is a distinctive type of place, a *heterotopia* in the sense that Michel Foucault uses the term, inasmuch as the outpost represents a ‘counter-site’ or a place ‘outside of all places.’ Heterotopias ‘are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about.’²⁶ The

²² Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), 142.

²³ In a moment of foreshadowing earlier in the story, Carlier had fixed the shabby cross that stood over the grave of his predecessor. He even takes pride in its sturdiness, noting that he could hang by his arms from the cross-piece with no trouble.

²⁴ Quoted in Ross C. Murfin, ‘Introduction: Biographical and Historical Contexts,’ in Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 3rd ed., ed. Ross C. Murfin (New York: Bedford/ St. Martin’s, 2011), 5.

²⁵ Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 3rd ed., ed. Ross C. Murfin. (New York: Bedford / St. Martin’s, 2011), 24.

²⁶ Michel Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces,’ trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986), 24.

outpost is literally 'outside' of the dominant social space; it is, by definition, distant from it, and yet the outpost is supposed to represent aspects of the dominant culture. In 'An Outpost of Progress', for example, the trading station functions as a node in a circuit of trade, but it also represents an outpost of European civilisation within the heart of Africa. As Foucault notes, 'the heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are themselves incompatible.'²⁷ In Conrad's story, this juxtaposition is revealed primarily in the ironic contrast or conflation of civilisation and savagery, but it also appears in the outlandish behaviour of the main characters. As the nameless servant on the steamer had predicted, Kayerts and Carlier 'form themselves' in this unique place.

The representation of the outpost, and what it does to both Kayerts and Carlier, can only be understood through Conrad's distinctive narrative voice and presentation. The author never discloses the specific geographical location of the trading station, although one can infer that it is one of those remote sites along the river, such as Marlow visited while travelling up the Congo River in *Heart of Darkness*. The reader gets a sense of its ominous atmosphere through indirect discourse:

They had been in a vast and dark country only a very short time and as yet always in the midst of other white men, under the eye and guidance of their superiors. And now dull as they were to the subtle influences of surroundings, they felt themselves very much alone, when suddenly left unassisted to face the wilderness, a wilderness rendered more strange, more incomprehensible by the mysterious glimpses of the vigorous life it contained. (79)

The meticulous description evokes the mysteriousness of the unfamiliar territory and discloses the hitherto undetectable anxiety both men feel. While at the outpost, Kayerts and Carlier feel uncomfortable and, in a way, lost because of their unfamiliarity with the new environment. Conrad's narrative strategy, however, provides readers with the men's unspoken opinion of the place and its impact upon the protagonists: 'dull as they were to the subtle influences of surroundings,' 'they felt themselves very much alone.' As the narrative progresses, the 'outpost' is mapped, not only spatially but with respect to the effects of the environment on the attitudes of the characters. In 'An Outpost of Progress,' Kayerts and Carlier are removed from the 'civilised' spaces in which they had been previously formed, and they are now placed in an unfamiliar territory which will exert its own subtle influence upon them. Unable to adapt or modify their character to fit this heterotopic space, the two men quickly disintegrate.

The suggestively named Henry Price is the only one who appears to adapt well to his environment. 'He spoke English and French,' according to the narrator, 'wrote a beautiful hand, understood bookkeeping,' and generally comports himself as the most competent person at the outpost (77). Price's commercial savvy, his ability to speak other languages, and most of all, his general survival skills, are the driving forces in making this trading station a successful operation, to the extent that it is successful. (His willingness to evade the rules, for example, is likely the reason he and the station can thrive in this place.) While Kayerts and Carlier display anxiety at the sudden arrival of strangers to the outpost, Price shows enthusiasm and sees an opportunity for business. Instead of questioning the men's presence, Price and his wife provide them with food and drinks. Throughout the unexpected visit, Price ignores both Kayerts and Carlier, for he knows that they would probably thwart any prospects for profitable trade. Only later does he reveal that the strangers, in fact, are ivory traders from Loanda, which happened to

²⁷ Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces' 25.

be the home town of Price's wife. Ever pragmatic, Price knows what must be done to keep the trade going; most importantly, he knows that if the outpost thrives, so does he. Additionally, as he indicates to Kayerts and Carlier, he is aware that the station has not been productive: 'Station in very bad order, sir. Director will growl. Better get a fine lot of ivory – then he say nothing' (88). It is here that one sees Price's skills at work; he is aware of the director's demand, and like a good office manager, Price convinces Kayerts and Carlier to make the best business decision in the interest of the company. Unlike the supposedly cultured Europeans, who leave their civilized space to run the outpost and bring progress to the unknown area but prove themselves to be utterly incompetent, Price, a 'Sierra-Leone nigger' (77) and thus also a sort of outsider to this region, is the one who ensures the success of the outpost. With this juxtaposition, Conrad highlights the absurdity of the situation in which a subaltern, African worshipper of 'evil spirits' (77) is effectively running the business that his ostensible superiors from Europe cannot possibly manage.

The language used in 'An Outpost of Progress' helps to underscore the spatial discontinuities or contrasting forms of spatial organisation simultaneously present in the heterotopia of the outpost. The distinctiveness of civilisation and savagery breaks down as the two fold in on one another, and the formerly held beliefs in clear light and dark, right and wrong, amity and hostility, to name a few, become problematic. As the narrator explains, 'the contact with pure unmitigated savagery, with primitive nature and primitive man, brings sudden and profound trouble to the heart' (79). The outpost is arguably a kind of 'crisis heterotopia,' a place reserved for individuals who are in a state of crisis. The particular crisis is related to imperialism itself, and it affects not only the colonised peoples, but also those who enforce its rule, from petty functionaries of the Empire, such as Kayerts and Carlier, to distant leaders in metropolitan Europe. Hence the location itself and those within it represent a critical state that extends well beyond the limited space of the site in question. The author's word choices (e.g., 'unmitigated savagery,' 'primitive nature,' and 'profound trouble to the heart') all point to a thoroughgoing psychological, cultural, and social crisis associated with the space and place.

Spatiality and Narrative Voice

The narrative voice in 'An Outpost of Progress' is as distinctive and mysterious as the place itself. As noted previously, Conrad does not create a fictional intermediary, like Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, to stand between text and reader, interpreting the scenes, characters, and events as they are encountered. The narrator of 'An Outpost of Progress' appears to be an omniscient third-person, yet the narrative voice shifts frequently in the text, moving from the wide-ranging, distant overview of an omniscient storyteller to more pointed, ironic commentary, and even into variations of a free indirect discourse that places the reader closer to the characters themselves. Arguably, this movement is a key aspect of the narrative's spatiality, since the stylistic choices replicate the various levels of distance between the individuals at the outpost and the world at large.

Previous readings of 'An Outpost of Progress' show a great deal of interest in Conrad's authorship and style. Fraser, for example, astutely examines the author's style and indicates that 'Conrad explores political and moral issues by constructing a network of ironic parallels, juxtapositions, and allusions.'²⁸ The narrator of the story actively engages the reader, exhorting the reader to view Kayerts, Carlier, and the outpost in a particular way, and unambiguously

²⁸ Fraser, 'Conrad's Irony' 156.

highlighting the absurdity of situation in the context of the high-minded rhetoric of Empire. As Fraser continues,

The ironic narrative perspective seeks to control and persuade us by inviting our recognition of significant incongruities and parallels. We are not asked to interpret, to fill in the gaps, but to discover the author's meaning and to take a moral stand with him – in 'An Outpost of Progress,' against the imperialist writers in *Blackwood's Magazine* and journalists in the daily papers.²⁹

Fraser here refers to the very sorts of writers whose grandiose prose concerning civilisation and vivid descriptions of exotic locales had so enthralled Carlier. (Kayerts and Carlier had discovered an old newspaper with an article detailing 'Our Colonial Expansion', which fills Carlier with pride, as he imagines that one day he and Kayerts will be renowned as 'the first civilized men to live in this very spot!') Conrad's narrator, employing irony with a sometimes heavy hand, does not encourage the reader to side with Kayerts, Carlier, or the propagandists of the civilising mission. As one reads the story, one cannot help but notice the narrator's control over the reader's perceptions and evaluations. The narrator, without any hesitation, discusses important topics of the time, especially imperialism and its ludicrous impact, not only on the colonised peoples, but also on those who are presumably part of civilised society. Conrad's use of omniscient narration gives readers who are presumably situated in the metropolitan space of Western Europe access to the exotic experience of the far-flung colonies, allowing them to imagine, for a short period, what is like to be part of an outpost in a distant colony. Individuals like Kayerts and Carlier, who are supposed to represent 'the very foundation of an "enlightened" social order,' as Fraser puts it,³⁰ are depicted as weak, incompetent, and almost totally dependent on the natives for survival. The reader, therefore, is forced to silently participate in the narrator's stern evaluation of the regime. Only later does Conrad give his audience access to the minds of his protagonists through the use of free indirect style, but even then, the reader likely does not doubt which side of the political and moral divide to take.

In 'An Outpost of Progress,' the narrator persistently criticises society, imperialism, and those who are part of the imperialist regime. At first the narrative voice presents itself as a critical observer, commenting upon the baleful effects of societal influence over its citizens. The narrator exposes society's predisposition to nurture its members, anthropomorphising the social formation in order to dramatise its effectiveness in conditioning the thoughts and behaviour of individuals in the society. Hence, when away from home, Kayerts and Carlier are incapable of caring for themselves, so dependent had they become on the comforting and familiar social matrix in which they had been formed prior to their arrival at the outpost. As Conrad writes,

Society – not from any tenderness, but because of its strange needs – had taken care of those two men, forbidding them all independent thought, all initiative, all departure from routine – and forbidding it under pain of death. They could only live in the condition of being machines. And now, released from the fostering care of men with pens behind the ears, or of men with gold lace on their sleeves, they were like those lifelong prisoners who, liberated after many years, do not know what use to make of their freedom. (80)

²⁹ Fraser, 'Conrad's Irony' 157.

³⁰ Fraser, 'Conrad's Irony' 156.

Civilisation moulds a person into a fine tool; a tool used for its own benefit. Additionally, as mere parts of a machine, the individuals lose their ability to function or even survive once outside the machine.

The narrator refers to society as a ‘fostering home’ and then compares it to a prison, but here the sense is that prison is more like a home, and freedom is terrifyingly unfamiliar. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault examines the distinctive space – the heterotopia – of the prison, which serves as an exemplary figure for the ways that power operates in modern societies:

This enclosed space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, ... in which power is exercised without division, according to a continual hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead – all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism.³¹

Foucault’s representation of the prison’s distinctive spatial organisation, which becomes the overarching model of the modern society as a whole, correlates with the narrator’s view of society in ‘An Outpost of Progress’, a place where individuals are, in a way, under supervision and monitored, not only by the dominant class but by any number of minor functionaries along the various points in the social matrix, from neighbours and family members up to the police or the state apparatus itself. In order to ensure that Kayerts and Carlier perform their tasks adequately, society disciplines them. However, once outside society’s disciplinary mechanisms, which ironically is also the zone in which they are most comfortable and secure, both men are incapable of caring for themselves. Moreover, they are incapable of *being* themselves, at least as they formerly were, and must ‘form themselves’ in this new, unfamiliar, and largely unregulated space.

The omniscient narrator, as he continues to oversee places and people, comments directly on the colonial situation and the imperialist system of which the outpost is a part. Adding to the irony, literature itself plays a role, as Conrad indicts the culture industry, which provides ideological support for the imperialist project. For instance, while shirking their duties, Kayerts and Carlier eagerly read and vehemently discuss the novels of such writers as Dumas, Cooper, or Balzac left in the outpost by their predecessors. In the midst of a discussion, they find a copy of a newspaper article promoting imperialism in the lofty rhetoric of the civilising mission, which immediately elevates their own sense of moral rectitude as they see themselves as agents of progress:

They also found some old copies of a home paper. That print discussed what it was pleased to call ‘Our Colonial Expansion’ in high-flown language. It spoke much of the rights and duties of civilization, of the sacredness of the civilizing work, and extolled the merits of those who went about bringing light, and faith and commerce to the dark places of the earth. Carlier and Kayerts read, wondered, and began to think better of themselves. (83)

This passage uses the popular press to make a jocular criticism of imperialism, but it also indicates both men’s blindness with respect to the unpleasant truth about colonialism. Neither Kayerts nor Carlier, even after reading and discussing literary works, are capable of formulating an opinion about the regime and their own position within it. Although the narrator indicates their interest, opinion, and criticisms about the stories they read, both men fail to see the irony of

³¹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977), 197.

a civilising mission that simultaneously serves as an excuse for a foreign power to invade other territories, subjugate their populations, and systematically replace the native culture and society with new institutions.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said observes that ‘The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who plans the future – these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative.’³² Indeed, the newspaper (if not the novels), which provides an authoritative narrative, reinforces the ideological power of an imperial, metropolitan state in its attempts to justify imperialism. Kayerts and Carlier, who – we are persistently reminded – are neither intelligent nor active, are almost ideally susceptible to this pro-imperialist rhetoric, for the reality that they witness at the trading station cannot compare to the glorious imagery of the colonists’ grand mission to bring light to the darkness.

At a stylistic level, Fraser has observed that ‘An Outpost of Progress’ contains ‘striking examples of innovative Conradian technique.’ Specifically, by creating ‘disruptive narrative shifts from ironic detachment to internal monologue,’ Conrad succeeds in ‘dislodging readers from their safe positions outside the tale; at the same time, his deployment of a sardonic narrative voice is controlled and rigorous in its attack on imperialist clichés.’³³ For much of the story, the narrator serves as a distant overseer, an omniscient narrator who occasionally editorialises, providing readers with opinions and criticisms of the characters in the tale and of the broader social or cultural formation in which they find themselves. At times, however, Conrad’s narrative style allows readers to have an idea of what is in Kayerts’s and Carlier’s minds. For the most part, one does not have direct access to the characters’ thoughts and emotions until later in the short story. As the plot approaches its climax, the distance between the narrative voice and the two main characters closes somewhat, and the reader is able to see into the psyches of the buffoonish company men.

After several months at the outpost, away from their nurturing European civilisation, Kayerts and Carlier begin to bicker more frequently, as each becomes testier and less collegial. A seething resentment, for their own condition and toward one another, takes hold of them. During one of their arguments, a petty dispute over whether to strictly ration the sugar or to use some for their coffee, Carlier calls Kayerts a ‘stingy old slave dealer,’ and the invocation of their ‘sin’ leads to a violent conflict. Kayerts loses control of his emotions and, in what he thinks of as self-defense, shoots Carlier. At that moment, using free indirect discourse, the narrator moves the reader closer to Kayerts’s mind:

He had plumbed in one short afternoon the depths of horror and despair, and now found repose in the conviction that life had no more secrets for him: neither did death! He sat by the corpse thinking; thinking very actively, thinking very new thoughts. He seemed to have broken loose from himself altogether. His old thoughts, convictions, likes and dislikes, things he respected and things he abhorred, appeared in their true light at last! – appeared contemptible and childish, false and ridiculous. He reveled in his new wisdom while he sat by the man he had killed. ... Incidentally he reflected that the fellow dead there had been a noxious beast anyway; that men died every day in thousands; perhaps in hundreds of thousands – who could tell? – and that in the number, that one death could not possibly

³² Said, *Culture and Imperialism* xiii.

³³ Fraser, ‘Introduction,’ in Conrad, *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’ and Other Stories* (New York: Penguin, 2007), xxiv–xxv.

make any difference; couldn't have any importance, at least to a thinking creature. He, Kayerts, was a thinking creature. He had been all his life, till that moment, a believer in a lot of nonsense like the rest of mankind – who are fools; but now he thought! He knew! He was at peace; he was familiar with the highest wisdom! (97)

This free indirect discourse makes available to the reader Kayerts's unspoken thoughts, and one finally sees the protagonist's mental instability and the terrifyingly formative effects of the place upon his character.

Up until this moment, Kayerts does nothing, questions nothing, and *thinks* about nothing productive; he simply complies with the orders he was given as best as he can. It is ironic that Carlier's wrongful death becomes a moment of epiphany for Kayerts, who begins to think 'very new thoughts,' as 'things appeared in their true light at last!' The exclamation point, indicates that we are privy to the protagonist's mind. Kayerts, for a brief instant, takes pride in these new thoughts. As he actively thinks, he scorns society and dissociates himself from it all: 'He knew!' He is now certain that 'the rest of mankind' are fools, since he alone had discovered the truth, 'he was familiar with the highest wisdom!' When he looks at Carlier's corpse, Kayerts tries to justify the crime with the excuse 'people died every day in thousands – who could tell?' and tries to convince himself that Carlier 'was a noxious beast anyway.' The combination of indirect and free indirect discourse show the disturbed thoughts in Kayerts's mind, but it also provides evidence of his unwillingness to face reality, all because of the way civilisation has molded him initially, and how he has formed himself in this place far away from that familiar space. In a sense, Kayerts becomes the quintessential civilised fool. Through this brief narrative, Conrad telescopically shifts the frames of reference from European society to the colonial outpost to the individual himself. This movement makes Conrad's critique of imperialism all the more meaningful, as the reader can see its horrific results manifest themselves in recognisable characters.

Conclusion

As Fraser and others have argued persuasively, Conrad develops his critique of imperialism most powerfully through his use of narrative voice in 'An Outpost of Progress.' In "'A Scrupulous Unity of Tone': Irony, Narrative Focus, and the Representation of Africa(ns) in Conrad's 'An Outpost of Progress,'" for example, Nils Clausson examines the ways in which Conrad's use of irony in the story serves his more generalised criticisms of both colonialism and racism. Paying close attention to narrative, tone, and characterisation, Clausson seeks to defend Conrad from an incisive, postcolonial critique, specifically Chinua Achebe's famous denunciation of the author. Responding to Achebe's notorious provocation, Clausson aims to prove that Conrad is not the 'bloody racist' that Achebe makes him to be. Clausson argues that, not only is Conrad *not* racist, but he is not even Eurocentric in his representation of Africans or Africa. In making his case, Clausson also challenges the claim, in this case by A. James M. Johnson, that 'An Outpost of Progress' endorses 'an unexamined binary opposition between a "superficially ordered but ultimately false realm of culture (signified by Europe) and an anarchic realm of nature (signified by Africa)."'³⁴ On the contrary, Clausson notes, Conrad's story shows that Africans are just as

³⁴ Nils Clausson, "'A Scrupulous Unity of Tone': Irony, Narrative Focus, and the Representation of Africa(ns) in Conrad's 'An Outpost of Progress.'" *The CEA Critic* 71.3 (Spring/Summer 2009), 71; Clausson quotes A. James M. Johnson, 'Into Africa: 'The Black Savages and The White Slaves' in Joseph Conrad's "An Outpost of Progress.'" *English Language Notes* 33.4 (June 1996), 67.

capable of progress as anyone else outside of the civilised areas of the world. Clausson indicates that the ‘civilised’ individuals, Kayerts and Carlier, are incapable of handling the station as well as the ‘savage’ Price (a.k.a. Makola): ‘Conrad’s irony reveals that the role of Makola in the story is to undermine the myth of a natural racial difference that was used to undermine the myth of a civilised Europe in opposition to a primitive Africa, which in turn justified European intervention in Africa in the name of Civilization and Progress.’ Clausson believes that many readers still tend to mistake the narrator’s voice for Conrad’s, and thus ‘ignore the subtle but unmistakable shifts in focalization in the story.’³⁵

However, at issue in Conrad’s narrative is not whether one can detect the author’s putative racism or anti-racism in the story. Rather, the better question is how race or racism connects to place, and more particularly to what Said in *Culture and Imperialism* referred to as the ‘attitudes of structure and reference’,³⁶ which underlie the elitist, racist, and imperialist ideologies that shape men like Kayerts, Carlier, and even Henry Price. (The latter could perhaps be seen as an early representative of what Frantz Fanon called the *national bourgeoisie*, whose ‘psychology ... is that of a businessman.’)³⁷ Through the use of a frequently ironic narrative voice, Conrad articulates the various boundaries marking the distance between a European-based mentality – complete with its morality and idealism with respect to its own justified mission to bring civilisation into the dark places of the world – and the reality of the colonial outpost. From a geocritical perspective, which highlights the relationships between space, place, and literary representation, one can see how Conrad invests his somewhat geographical narrative with a profound sense of psychological spatiality, as can be seen in the wild epiphany of Kayerts’s final moments. The relative distance between the metropolitan or ‘civilised’ space of Europe and the benighted realms of ‘savage’ Africa is both highlighted and suppressed, as the agents of civilisation are shown to be fools, then becoming slavers and murderers, while the purported beneficiaries of the civilising mission (here, especially, Gobila’s villagers) come to ruin and grief.

The title itself, ‘An Outpost of Progress,’ expresses at once both the idealism of the European ideology and the acerbic recognition of its hypocrisy when faced with the facts on the ground at the trading station. This ironic position is highlighted in the tale’s final moment, as we see the corpse of Kayerts appearing to stand at attention, with all the formal pomp and circumstance of that quasi-military attitude, but ‘irreverently, he was putting out a swollen tongue at his Managing Director’ (99). The macabre image of the dutiful civil servant blowing a final raspberry at his boss might be said to explode the discourse of progress and civilisation in a single, irrevocable moment, which could be seen as the narrator’s last laugh as well. As the unnamed servant on the director’s ship had predicted, Kayerts and Carlier had indeed ‘formed themselves’ at the outpost of progress, and Conrad makes clear that their formation, much like the form of European imperialism in Africa writ large, was one of absurdity and horror.

Thais Rutledge is a graduate student at Texas State University, where she is completing a thesis on the relationships among styles, narrative form, and spatiality in the novels of Virginia Woolf.

³⁵ Clausson 72, 73.

³⁶ Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 62.

³⁷ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 98.

Robert T. Tally Jr. is an associate professor of English at Texas State University. His recent books include *The Routledge Handbook of Literature and Space*; *The Geocritical Legacies of Edward W. Said*; *Fredric Jameson: The Project of Dialectical Criticism*; *Poe and the Subversion of American Literature*; and *Spatiality*.

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