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A sense of place in the writings of Conrad & Joyce

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Abstract

In this paper, the sense of place is examined in two literary works of modernist fiction. In the two works, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and James Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914-1915) the place (setting) dominates each narrative and both are directly linked to each of the authors' personal experiences, the interconnection is vital to both novels.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Sense of Place, Setting, Literature Analysis

Conrad & Joyceの人生経験が文章に及ぼした影響

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The question of “place” is central to the modernist prose text which is demonstrated as a fundamental element within two of the giants of the modernist genre; that being Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and James Joyce’s *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914–1915). Both of these seminal authors address many of the themes within the modernist genre in their works, but it is within these two novels that “place” is inescapable. Conrad could not write *Heart of Darkness* without the Belgian Congo and Joyce could not write *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* without Ireland and the city of Dublin; place permeates the narratives of both novels.

The first parallel is simple; it is experience of place. In the case of Joseph Conrad personal experience is a factor within his writing. Marlow, the protagonist of *Heart of Darkness* is a riverboat captain for a Belgian trading company and is sent up the Congo River in search of the rogue trader, Kurtz. This fictional account is taken straight out of Conrad’s own life as he did almost the exact same thing, minus searching for a rogue trader, in 1890 when he was working in Africa. *The Congo Diary* (1925) tells of his time spent journeying up the valley of the Congo River into the heart of Africa and much of what he saw later appears in *The Heart of Darkness*. In his diary, Conrad makes continuous references to the African villages he passes as seeming “invisible” (104), in a rather patronizing manner; he dismisses the villages as having no value, no substance. In the novel, the descriptions of the fictitious villages are embellished but the tone remains when Marlow passes through several abandoned villages he observes that there is, “something pathetically childish in the ruins of grass walls.” (23) Considering how the descriptions of the physical setting are essential to establishing the dark ominous tone of the novel it is clear that the Congo River had an impact on Conrad and his writing of *Heart of Darkness*.

The connection of personal experience to place is a very profound factor in James Joyce’s writing as well. The most autobiographical of his books, *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914–1915), is a novel full of moments of Joyce’s own life. When the protagonist, Stephen Dedalus declares, “This race and this country... produced me,” (Farrell, 1) he is referring to the Irish and Ireland. The history of Irish nationalism that dominated his childhood, his Jesuit schooling, and his disillusionment with his native country all play a significant role in the novel. These experiences will set the structure of the novel.

Joyce uses a set structure of locations in the telling of Stephen’s story. The novel is, “organized into a pattern of home – school – home – school” (Gibson) giving Joyce the opportunity to explore history of place through Irish nationalism, reflect on the Jesuit education at the three schools Stephen attends (Clongoves Wood College, Belvedere College, and University College), and to eventually lead the protagonist to decided to leave his place, Ireland to head for continental Europe to pursue his new found revelation of artistic individualism.

Ireland, as a place, at the time of Stephen’s childhood, the beginning of the book, is rife with Irish nationalism. The autobiographical nature of this novel has to allow for the speculation that the history

of Ireland is not only important for the setting of the narrative but also reflective of Joyce himself. Stephen's first home memory is of a political argument that takes place over a Christmas dinner between the adults of his family. This disagreement occurs as a result of Ireland suffering a major political blunder with the scandalous fall from grace of Charles Stewart Parnell, a nationalist Protestant leader fighting for Home Rule and independence from British Rule, "which cut through families with a knifelike sharpness." (Farrell, 1) The reason behind this very popular politician's fall was the power of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, which made even zealot supporters turn on a leader if he was deemed a "public sinner" (31) voiced by Stephen's aunt, only to be revered by his father – "Poor Parnell!... My dead king." (39) This division of the Irish population was a major problem for the desire of Irish independence because it put the Catholic Church at odds with millions of Irish people. Ireland in the 1890s was a place being torn apart by religion and politics. Joyce uses the political situation of Parnell to show the absurdity of the fact that, "he (Parnell) was persecuted and discredited, on moralistic grounds, by the same people he had spent his life trying to liberate." (Noor, 10) By the conclusion of the story Stephen has ambitions to leave his country; this was true of Joyce, who did in fact go into a self-imposed exile in 1904, never to return. The words of Stephen, in chapter five, articulate this point of wanting to escape from Ireland as a place.

When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight.
You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets. (220)

The entire narrative revolves around place, as Ireland is continually in conscious of Stephen; it is like a grand obsession as he moves towards thinking for himself.

Similarly, Joseph Conrad uses the same type of location structure to focus on the lightness of one place (Europe) and the darkness of another (Africa) in *The Heart of Darkness* following this format: Europe – Outer Station – Central Station – Inner Station – Europe. The vivid descriptions of each locale helps Conrad lead the reader away from the light in Europe to journey further and further up the river into an abyss of the unknown... into the heart of darkness to the point that the reader will see this mysterious continent the way Conrad wishes to portray it, as dark, but eventually returning you to the safety of European civilization.

Europe is a place of light. Two of the imperial centers of 19th century Europe (Brussels and London) are described as being places of civilization. In the company's office in Brussels the two secretaries are described as to be, "guarding the door of Darkness" (12) which implies it is light on this side of the door which is the gateway to an assignment in the Belgian Congo, which Marlow observes, "not many of those she looked at ever saw her again." (12) So Africa, in contrast is somewhere that is dark, dangerous and to be feared. In the beginning of the journey to Africa, Conrad quickly establishes a sense of distance from the light of Europe, making the first references to darkness. While on the

Thames River, Marlow alludes to the Roman period of history in Great Britain as a land which “has been one of the dark places of the earth.” (5) Conrad is moving us away from a place of lightness and towards the darkness.

Africa, as a place, is dark, inferior and unknown in Conrad’s narrative. If one were to look at an atlas in 1899 you would see the African continent as a vast land, as a “place of darkness” (9) as so little exploration had been carried out of the interior lands at that time, a *terra incognita*. The Congo River appeared as a “mighty big river... resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over the vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land. (9) This is powerful imagery, comparing the Congo River, the source of life to Central Africa to a serpent. This biblical metaphor presents the serpent as a reviled creature symbolizing humanity’s fall from paradise (Gen. 3.4), which Conrad is associating with Africa as a place. The religious banter continues from the first encounter with the continent the reader is meant to feel the ominous presence of darkness. Marlow describes the land he sees ahead of him as a, “God-forsaken wilderness” (15) all of this before he has even set foot on land. Conrad uses similes to further develop the ominous tone of the river by writing it was, “like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and big trees were kings.” (41) These prehistoric references to wilder times of nature keeps the reader locked into a very uncomfortable dark place indeed where the strangest things seem possible. Conrad even uses allusions of destroying one’s place towards the end of the novel in reference to Kurtz being able to remove himself from the earth, “He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! He had kicked the earth to pieces.” (82) In the end, the dark secrets of Africa are too much to be revealed to the European woman because being back in the light, there is no place for the darkness.

Joyce and Conrad have “place” within their novels as essential literary elements. At no point can the reader separate the African Congo from *Heart of Darkness* nor can they do the same with Ireland in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Conrad would be deemed a racist by notable African writers such as Chinua Achebe for his depiction of Africa as a place where “darkness” permeates the land. Joyce would try to reject his Irish homeland but with no success as every book he wrote seemed to be obsessed with Ireland, even Stephen Dedalus his fictional hero never leaves as he winds up near destitute and still in Dublin, Ireland when Joyce resumes his story in *Ulysses* in 1922. The inescapable fact is that without “place” these two works of the modernist genre would simply fall apart.

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