

"The Fraud of Progress," by Brian Dooley

The following essay was written a number of years ago by Brian Dooley in my course "20th Century World Fiction" and is included as an example of a terrific interpretive-problem essay. It is reproduced with Mr. Dooley's permission:

The Fraud of Progress

Kayerts, the director of the remote trading station in Africa, has just hung himself in the final scene of Joseph Conrad's story, "An Outpost of Progress." The suicide of Kayerts is especially ironic because it occurs as the long awaited steamer finally arrives. The Managing Director has neglected this trading station and the white men; he considers them to be useless and therefore well-suited to this particular station. Conrad describes the final scene of the dead Kayerts hanging from the cross put over the grave of the station's former director as follows: "His toes were only a couple of inches above the ground; his arms hung swiftly down; he seemed to be standing rigidly at attention, but with one purple cheek playfully posed on the shoulder. And, irreverently, he was putting out a swollen tongue at his Managing Director." These final lines serve as more than a mere description of the final scene. Despite being involuntary, the contempt and irreverence of the deceased Kayerts' final gesture is, according to Conrad, directed at the Managing Director. Yet, to consider this gesture as merely indicative of contempt toward the Managing Director for his neglect in returning to the station is overly simplistic. Therefore, the questions remain: what is the source of Kayerts' contempt, and toward who or what is it directed?

Kayerts' gesture was involuntary and resulted from his act of committing suicide. Thus, to understand its significance, it is necessary to understand what led him to hang himself. There are a number of factors that may have distressed Kayerts. The trading station was in disorder, and all the company men were gone. Disapproval by the Managing Director, whom Kayerts had promised to please with his performance as director of the station, was likely. Even worse, on the previous day Kayerts had shot his companion, Carlier. The body had not yet been buried; he could not explain that Carlier had died of fever. The slave trade of the company men for ivory which Makola had orchestrated was another source of potential guilt. The possible consequences for these occurrences threatened Kayerts' ability to earn the dowry for his daughter which was the sole reason why he had left his safe, stable

government job. The days of endless idle waiting for the return of the steamer had taken its toll on Kayerts' physical and mental well-being. These circumstances provide a logical background for Kayerts' suicide. However, the contemplation by Kayerts after he has shot and killed Carlier provides evidence that these circumstances do not adequately explain the suicide.

When Kayerts realized that Carlier had been unarmed when he shot him, "he found life more terrible and difficult than death." In the following hours, Conrad tells us that Kayerts had "found repose in the conviction that life had no more secrets for him: neither had death . . . He seemed to have broken loose from himself altogether," and "reveled in his new wisdom." The frightening success of his imaginary transposition with the dead Carlier intimates that in a sense Kayerts is already dead.

These contemplations by Kayerts must be viewed with reference to Conrad's earlier description of the two men. "They were two perfectly insignificant and incapable individuals, whose existence is only rendered possible through the high organization of civilized crowds." As well as being explicitly stated, the two men's utter dependence on the society of which they are products is revealed in numerous ways. For instance, in the beginning both men dread the thought of the other dying. They serve for each other as the only living connection to the "world" they know. Both men miss the lives that they have left behind: the safe, secure, monotonous lives sheltered from the harshness of reality by all the trappings of civilization. They were fascinated by the novels which remained from the former director. They would have had no interest in them had they not been in the jungle. They were comforted by the paper entitled "'Our Colonial Expansion . . . which extolled the merits of those who went around bringing light, faith, and commerce to the dark places of the Earth." They repeatedly demonstrated their belief in the superiority of themselves and their society over the people of the villages with which they traded.

Until their assignment at the trading station, both men had been sheltered from all perceptions of reality which were not enshrined in the exigencies of civilized society as they knew it. They grasped desperately at any little token of civilization because it was their only defense against the terror of the menacing and unknown environment in which they found themselves. As time passed, this defense was rendered increasingly ineffectual -- withered away by fear, uncertainty, and

isolation from the society which had molded their narrow, sophisticated perceptions of physical reality. These men were compelled by the society that created them to regard themselves as superior to the native people, but these notions of superiority were completely false in light of the context in which they were held.

The barbaric episode which leads to Carlier's death reveals to Kayerts a new, more pure, and more simple reality. The basic necessity of survival subverts all the notions of civility which Kayerts has clung to for defense against the primitive environment of the jungle. "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 had been all his life, until that moment, a believer in a lot of nonsense like the rest of mankind -- who are fools." Kayerts commits suicide because the whole foundation of his identity had been shattered. After his experience in the jungle, he could never return to the sheltered existence which he had beforehand. He could not regain the ignorant enjoyment of his previous life after the fragility of its foundations were revealed, yet that existence was the only one Kayerts could possibly survive in given his previous life experiences. In short, all notions of security had been discredited for a man who had been conditioned to regard security as the most essential necessity of life.

This revelation was the source of contempt in Kayerts' final gesture -- contempt for the civilization that propagated in him such a false sense of superiority and security and, in essence, left him totally defenseless against the most harsh and basic reality: mere survival. His contempt was directed at that aspect of civilization which had lured him into the jungle and was responsible for both his psychological and subsequent physical death. It was directed at the Managing Director, the author of the paper "Our Colonial Expansion," and every other aspect of society which propagated the "contemptible and childish, false and ridiculous" notions of righteousness and superiority, which had allowed him to stumble head first into his downfall. Had Kayerts answered the call of "progress" -- the whistle of the returning steamer on the river -- and continued to foster the illusions which his revelation had discredited rather than committing suicide, he would become himself a perpetuator, contemptible and blameworthy, of the "nonsense" of civilization.