Power Relationships in 
William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*,
Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*,
and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*

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In any colony, relationships depend on power. Power refers to the ability to control a country, an area, or an individual as well as the ability to impose particular rules and restrictions on the natives of the area in question. Of course, power may take different degrees and forms. The colonizer does not need, in all cases, to use force. As Said (1979) put it, the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is “a power relationship.” For the colonized, the only safe way is to conform and be quiet. S/he is to deny the self and all will be well. This paper explores the colonial relationship between the colonizer and the colonized in the light of what is said above in William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Such literary works render the relationship of both the colonizer and the colonized into fixed, oppositional terms, which remain influential at all times.

The colonial relationship . . . chained the colonizer and the colonized into an implacable dependence, molded their respective characters, and dictated their conduct.

– Memmi (1965, ix)

In any colony, relationships depend on power. Of course, power may take different degrees and levels. The colonizer does not need, in all cases, to use force, but what this paper means by power here is the ability to control a country or an area as well as the ability to impose particular rules and restrictions on the natives of the region in question. According to Said (1979, 5), the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is “a relationship of power.” For the colonized, the only safe course is to conform and be quiet. S/he is to deny the self and all will be well.

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The paper explores the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized in the following works: Shakespeare’s (1969) *The Tempest*, Defoe’s (1948) *Robinson Crusoe*, and Conrad’s (1969) *Heart of Darkness*. Such works “render the relationship of colonizer and colonized in fixed, oppositional terms which remain influential” (Cartelli 1995, 85) even after the gaps between cultures have apparently narrowed.

In Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Prospero rules the island as patriarchal king. His authority is problematic to us as readers because he seems so patriarchal, colonialis, even sexist and racist in his claim to himself the right to control others in the name of Western and Christian values. His subjects are Caliban, Ariel, and his daughter. The battle between Prospero and Caliban is one of “master” and “slave.”

Caliban is seen as, in Said’s (1993, 213) words, “a state of existence” which can be exploited to the power of another’s own development. Caliban, the child of a witch, is enslaved and robbed of his island. He is called many harsh names by Prospero and his daughter Miranda, such as “abhorred slave” (Shakespeare 1969, 1.2.352), “a born devil” (4.1.188), and “a thing of darkness” (5.1.275). He protests with some justification that the island is his in the first place and that Prospero and Miranda are interlopers. Indeed, his existence calls into question the value of civilization. What does he learn from Prospero other than, as he puts it, to “know how to curse” (1.1.363)?

On the other hand, Prospero controls and uses for his interests and purposes the sprite Ariel. Although Prospero has rescued Ariel from the spell of the witch and curbed the cannibal appetite of Caliban, yet these deeds do not grant him the right to use these creatures and deny them their natural freedom on the island.

The third subject is Prospero’s daughter, Miranda. He controls her and requires her complete obedience. This demand is due to the patriarchal system Prospero has inherited in Milan.

In brief, Prospero demands complete obedience from his subjects on the island. He appoints himself as if he were a god. He sees Fortune’s gift of delivering his enemies into his hand as an opportunity to forgive and host them, not be revenged. At last, Shakespeare is not clear regarding the future of the island. We cannot be sure what the island will be like once Prospero leaves.

The second work is Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* where the slave Friday is not luckier than Caliban. Here, Crusoe, like Prospero of *The Tempest*, is “the founder of a new world, which he rules and reclams for Christianity and England.” True, Crusoe is “enabled by an ideology of overseas expansion” of the sixteenth and seventeenth century “exploration voyages that laid the foundations of the great colonial empires” (Said 1993, 70).

Managing to build his colony, the relationship between Crusoe and his inferiors on the island runs according to the general framework of the British colonial policy: the colonizer and the colonized. He proves the superiority of his race in the text even before coming to the island. He engaged colonial labor force and had workers on his plantation.

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1 Subsequent citations from this source include only the act, scene, and line numbers.
In addition, Crusoe also relates how he sold Xury, the boy who helped him escape from the pirates, after Crusoe himself had experienced slavery. On the island, he relegates the Caribbean Friday to perpetual servitude. The natives for him are the last class he will think of. When it comes to the European race, it is different. Finding another Spaniard chained, he hurries to help him in spite of the fact that Spain is another colonial power, which has its own interests that may contradict the British ones.

On the contrary, Crusoe feels superior when it comes to other races. For him, as the natives “were naked, unarmed wretches, ’tis certain I am superior to them” (Defoe 1948, 257). Despite the hot weather, Crusoe cannot bear nakedness because clothing helps him maintain his difference from “naked savages” (Defoe 1948, 188). In brief, Crusoe creates a master-slave relationship with Friday that runs according to the terms of the stronger. Friday’s conformity stems from his fear of Crusoe.

At the end, Friday’s acceptance of Crusoe’s terms is merely a defense mechanism, a means of remaining alive and secure under the powerful Christian and European protection. Friday is not different from Ariel of The Tempest, whose acceptance of Prospero’s domination is a means of remaining secure from the witch’s spell. We have to realize that control differs from one power to another power.

However, for the purpose of communication, “Defoe [keeps] Friday’s language acquisition skills at a rather low level” (Spivak 1991, 169), as it is the case with Caliban of The Tempest. Friday “learns his master’s speech, does his master’s work, happily swears loyalty, believes the culture of the master is better, and kills his other self” (ibid.) in order to satisfy Crusoe’s colonial appetite.

As a colonial power, Crusoe remains the absolute monarch of his land. Indeed, Crusoe’s right over Friday, Friday’s father, and the Spaniard captain, who came to the island and are rescued, is a right of conquest and colonization. By rescuing them from death at the hands of the cannibals, Crusoe gains complete control over their lives. The scene is almost repeated in The Tempest where Ariel is rescued and claimed by Prospero. Crusoe insists on a promise of absolute obedience to his wishes from those whom he leaves to bring over other prisoners. Eventually, the end here is different from that of The Tempest. Keeping his title as the absolute monarch of this colony, Crusoe departs the island.

Conrad’s Heart of Darkness is the third example that depicts the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. This novella is another work on the contrast between civilization and primitive culture as it is the case with the previous works. In Heart of Darkness, Africa is associated with darkness, and civilization with brightness.

“Conrad makes his African characters bear the burden of that darkness and thus perpetuates identifications that justify European contempt and domination” (McClure 1985, 156), and indeed exploitation. This reminds one of what Prospero calls Caliban in The Tempest, “a thing of darkness” (5.1.275). However, “speaking through Marlow, Conrad identifies the Africans . . . as demons and fiends, insists that ‘the picture of life’ in the Congo forests is appallingly different from the picture in Europe” (McClure 1985, 156).
As he describes his voyage to Kurtz, comparisons cease and the emphasis falls more and more on the savage otherness of the Congolese.

The Africans are depicted as cannibals, violent, savage, lustful, in a word, bestial—features that rely on imperial racism. In his descriptions, Conrad appears as if he were legitimating these people. If they are so, they need someone to take care of them. Nigerian novelist Achebe (1977) attacked *Heart of Darkness* as racist. Conrad projects the image of Africa as the other world. As a main character, Kurtz is an artist, a genius, and a quite powerful, eloquent “voice” as well.

As Achebe (1977) points out, the African characters are, in contrast, rendered almost without intelligible language. The “natives” in their darkness set Kurtz up as an idol; they worship his unrestrained power and lust. According to the Russian traveler, “They adored him . . . He came to them with thunder and lightning” (Conrad 1969, 84). “Everything belonged to him” (Conrad 1969, 73). Kurtz has founded his “ivory-trading empire” (Said 1993, 23). The Russian tells Marlow that the sick man, i.e., Kurtz, has become corrupted by the natives he had hoped to enlighten. The relation, hence, becomes more complicated. Kurtz, who is aware of the darkness, is doomed, is himself swallowed by the darkness and evil he has hoped to penetrate.

At the end of the novella, Conrad “could not then conclude that imperialism had to end so that ‘natives’ could lead lives free from European domination. As a creature of his time [and culture, like other writers], Conrad could not grant the natives their freedom, despite his severe critique of the imperialism that enslaved them” (Said 1993, 30). Indeed, the whole narrative is no more than “Europeans performing acts of imperial mastery and will in (or about) Africa” (Said 1993, 23).

In conclusion, the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is a power relationship where the strong European controls, dominates, and exploits others. The natives of the colonies are enslaved, and exploited, in turn. This is what is expected to be found in works written by authors who lived at the time of European expansion.

References


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