

Max Beerbohm's "The Feast":

A Reassessment

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I

Max Beerbohm's "The Feast," one of the short stories in *A Christmas Garland* (1912) (a collection of parodies of British writers of that time) and a well-known parody of Joseph Conrad's early works, has tended to be seen as a work which scathingly makes a mockery of Conrad's faults as a writer. For example, Wilfred S. Dowden points out the flaws of Conrad's early prose and maintains that "The Feast" focuses on them. He says that "The Lagoon," Conrad's short story which Conrad himself claimed was the source of Beerbohm's parody, "is overburdened with an effusive use of imagistic detail, much of which is irrelevant to the progress of the narrative. There is an overindulgence in sonorous sounds in the descriptive language, which is probably intended to evoke emotions of a melancholy character, but which results only in awkward expressions and idioms strung together in sequence. This is the style so cleverly satirized by Sir Max Beerbohm in *A Christmas Garland*" (29). Likewise, Marvin Mudrick posits: "As for the exotic Conrad, ...he is his own parodist. 'The Lagoon' is as ludicrous as Max Beerbohm's parody of it; it pours out cataracts of the silliest and most narcissistic prose by any major writer in English" (5). Lawrence Graver's argument is in the same vein: "Neither the theme nor the setting of 'The Lagoon' is particularly distinctive. ... Max Beerbohm based a clever parody on the adjectival excesses of its style" (26). Albert Guerard says that "'The Lagoon' is a distinctly less coherent story [than 'An Outpost of Progress,' another short story by Conrad] which may well have deserved Max Beerbohm's amusing parody" (65). In short, "The Feast" has often been regarded as a work which exaggerates Conrad's "narcissistic," "overindulgent" way of writing.

It seems to me, however, that "The Feast" as a work of parody does not just mock Conrad, and that it also shows Beerbohm's keen insight into the themes of Conrad's

works and brings many important Conradian motifs to light. It can be seen as an early appreciation of Conrad's genius and presents us with an idea of how his works were read and interpreted by capable readers of that time. At the same time, Beerbohm's portrayal of the Africans as violent thugs in his story shows the prevailing racial stereotypes of his age, and consequently makes us see that Conrad's treatment of African people in his works was in many respects fairer than that of his contemporaries. Re-evaluating Beerbohm's parody provides us with a key to understanding the contemporary reception of Conrad's works, and I should like to do this in what follows.

II

"The Feast" tells of a complacent British colonial trading agent who is deceived by his African servant and taken to an unknown place in Africa on Christmas Day, only to find out he is going to be killed and cooked for a cannibal feast. (No place names are mentioned, as in Conrad's "An Outpost of Progress" and "Heart of Darkness," but we can guess that the setting is Africa because Mr. Williams, the protagonist, intends to trade "cotton cloths, ...beads, ...[and] brass wire" for "ivory.")

A Christmas Garland was published, so to speak, as a "Christmas Book" (like Dickens's), and so when the readers saw the title "The Feast," they must have at first imagined a Christmas feast. But actually the tale is not about a European Christmas but about a feast held by cannibals. Mr. Williams blindly assumes that he is the master of and superior to the Africans, but it turns out that the indigenous people *are* the masters and that the "feast" held in this story is theirs. This subversive irony which caricatures the complacency of a self-important European is, as it were, typically Conradian.

In the opening passage, the anonymous narrator tells us that Mahamo, Mr. Williams's servant, is "watchful at the hut's mouth" in which "the white man" sleeps. One who reads this passage for the first time may assume that Mahamo is a faithful servant who devotedly guards "the white man," but actually Mahamo is doing nothing of the sort. Instead, he is ensuring that Mr. Williams, an important ingredient for his special cookery, cannot escape.

The second and third paragraphs tell us of the appetites and the fierce nature of the wild creatures of the tropics: "Flying squadrons of mosquitoes...flickered and darted over [Mr. Williams], working hard[.] ... Cohorts of yellow ants disputed him against

cohorts of purple ants, the two kinds slaying one another in thousands"(13). A little later the text tells us as follows: "There came from [the forest] the equable rumour of myriads of winged things and crawling things newly roused to the task of killing and being killed"(14). These depictions remind us of the system called "food chain" or "food web" in which all creatures feed upon one another. Later in the story, human beings (Mr. Williams and the cannibals) become engaged in the same kind of struggle for survival and are shown to be in a sense on the same level as the wild creatures. The pseudo-Darwinian idea that man is merely one of the animals struggling for survival is also typically Conradian (as seen in Jim's disgraceful escape from the seemingly-sinking ship for dear life in *Lord Jim*(1900) or in the European seamen's cannibalism in "Falk" (1903)), and Beerbohm rightly emphasizes this.

Mr. Williams, like Kayerts and Carrier in "An Outpost of Progress," has a somewhat racist or European-centered view. He speaks to Mahamo in a contemptuous tone: "This is a pretty place you've brought me to! ... Christmas Day, too! Of all the [days of the year] — But I suppose it seems all right to you, you funny blackamoor, to be here on Christmas Day?"(14) Mr. Williams is contemptuous of Mahamo ("you funny blackamoor") simply because Mahamo does not share his idea of Christmas. His way of thinking seems to be dependent on the Christian-centered dichotomy, Christian/heathen (his remark above can be paraphrased as follows: "it may be all right to you, a heathen, to be in a place like this for work on Christmas Day, but it's not all right to me, a Christian"). To Mr. Williams's scornful remark, Mahamo answers "humbly" that it is a feast-day of his own people also(14). This is the first hint that Mahamo may have an agenda of his own, but Mr. Williams is too complacent to realize this, and blindly continues to believe that Mahamo is a humble servant. Soon, however, it becomes clear which of them is really the master.

In contrast to Mr. Williams's contempt for the Africans, the text itself shows the cultural correspondence between Europe and Africa. When Mr. Williams recalls the Christmas feast in his home country, he thinks of "the sound of church-bells" and "especial cookery"(14). From our angle, "the sound of church-bells" corresponds to the "Sound of chanting...[and] the drum"(15) of the Africans, and "especial cookery" corresponds to the special cookery which will be made from Mr. Williams himself. In this way it is suggested that the European ways of life are analogous to those of Africans, and this, too, is a typically Conradian motif. In "Heart of Darkness," when

Marlow, the British narrator-protagonist, hears the sound of the Africans' drums, he thinks that it has "as profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country"(161). Perhaps Beerbohm got a hint from this passage.

Thus Beerbohm presents us with a troubling question recurrent in Conrad's works: is there any difference between European Christmas and the cannibal feast, between human beings and wild creatures which engage in "the task of killing and being killed"? Like "Heart of Darkness," Beerbohm's short story shows the potential primitiveness of "civilized" human beings.

Another Conradian motif which Beerbohm skillfully presents is the communication gaps between individuals. When Mr. Williams says to Mahamo, "I've been eaten up [he means 'by the mosquitoes']," Mahamo (who is planning to eat him and for whom Mr. Williams's body is valuable) interprets the words literally and is upset. When he sees that Mr. Williams is intact, he is mentally relieved and says, "You white men sometimes say strange things that deceive the heart." (This remark may remind us of Conrad's *An Outcast of the Islands*, in which Aïssa, a Malay girl, says to Willems, the European protagonist (whose name may be the source of that of Mr. Williams in this parody), "What is the land...from which you come? A land of lies and of evil"(144).) Then follows a series of exchanges in which Mahamo shrewdly conceals his true intention:

[Mahamo:] "It is a feast-day...[o]f [my people] also."

[Mr. Williams:] "But they'll do business [the trade of ivory for cotton cloths, beads, and brass wire] first?"

"They must first do that [business, i.e. killing and cooking Mr. Williams]."

"And they'll bring ivory with them [in order to buy cotton cloths, beads, and brass wire from us]?"

"Every man will bring ivory [to buy you, an ingredient of special dishes, from me]."

Mr. Williams is not aware of the true meanings of Mahamo's words. Mahamo's way of talking to him might remind us of Razumov's way of speaking to the revolutionaries in *Under Western Eyes*(1911) – Mahamo does not tell any lies to Mr. Williams, but is able to deceive him. In this way Beerbohm imitates the Conradian idea that we often

misunderstand each other because, as Marlow says in "Heart of Darkness," "We live, as we dream — alone"(172).

Another Conradian motif which Beerbohm brings to light is that in the modern world man is treated as property (this is one of the major themes in *Nostramo*(1904)). Mr. Williams thinks that he is going to trade "cotton cloths, ...beads, ...[and] brass wire" for "ivory," but the truth is perhaps that, as Addison C. Bross says, Mahamo "sells Mr. Williams to the savages, who are cannibals, for a feast"(334). For Mahamo, Mr. Williams is just a merchandise. Even for his company, "Mr. Williams [i]s, not less than the goods, of a kind easily replaced"(15). It can in a sense be said that the company and Mahamo treat Mr. Williams in the same way — neglecting his humanity and regarding him as merely a kind of property. This is a Conradian type of criticism directed toward the calculating mercilessness of commercial companies, and reminds us of the tragedy of Kayerts and Carlier in "An Outpost of Progress," who are neglected by their manager and consequently driven to death.

Beerbohm also skillfully imitates Conrad's narrative technique, which Ian Watt has named "delayed decoding." At the end of the story, Mr. Williams, not knowing at all that he is going to be killed, tries to speak to Mahamo but

He was silenced by sight of what seemed to be a young sapling sprung up from the ground within a yard of him — a young sapling tremulous, with a root of steel. Then a thread-like shadow skimmed the air, and another spear came impinging the ground within an inch of his feet. (15)

Until the last sentence, readers are not informed that spears are being thrown at him. Until this passage the narrator has been omniscient, but here his perception suddenly becomes limited to the same level as that of Mr. Williams. In "Heart of Darkness," when an African helmsman is killed with a spear, Marlow at first portrays the spear as "what appeared a long cane"(201), and Beerbohm in as early as 1912 noted this Conradian narrative technique which was to be analyzed by Ian Watt about seventy years later.

In this way, Beerbohm's short story can be seen as an appreciation of the greatness of Conrad's works which were generally not so highly evaluated at that time. Beerbohm has picked out technical innovations and themes which are indeed key aspects of

Conrad's fictional *œuvre*. When we compare Conrad's works and "The Feast," however, we cannot but feel the difference between Conrad and Beerbohm in the portrayal of African people. In "The Feast," the Africans are simply violent gangs who are willing and ready to attack a European and eat him; on the other hand, in Conrad's works, African (or any non-European) people are never depicted as murdering thugs who attack Europeans. In "Heart of Darkness," the African tribesmen ruled by Kurtz (a European) *pretend* to attack Marlow's boat, but it is only because Kurtz has forced them to do so. Marlow says about this "attack" as follows: "What we...alluded to as an attack was really an attempt at repulse. The action was very far from being aggressive...and in its essence [it] was purely protective. ... [The arrows the Africans cast at us] looked as though they wouldn't kill a cat. [A Russian who knew Kurtz] informed me...that it was Kurtz who had ordered the attack to be made on [my] steamer"(197, 200, 229). Thus, as this Russian says, "they meant no harm"(213), at least to the Europeans.

Beerbohm's portrayal of the Africans as aggressive murderers reminds us of popular adventure story writers of the time, such as H. Rider Haggard, rather than of Conrad. In Haggard's *Allan Quatermain*(1887), for example, the Africans (the Masai) violently attack the British protagonists, and their cruelty and their having "long spears"(86) are repeatedly emphasized: "[T]he Masai warrior...shook his huge spear at us[.] ... Down went our poor Askari [a soldier following the protagonists]..., a great spear standing out a foot behind his back...and others of our party shared [this man's] fate"(32, 87). Beerbohm's depiction of the Africans' throwing their spears at Mr. Williams seems to be influenced by this kind of contemporary popular adventure stories, and we see that Conrad's portrayal of the Africans is far fairer than Beerbohm's. In "imitating" Conrad's works, Beerbohm put his own racial prejudice (which he shared with many contemporary Europeans such as Haggard) into his parody. Conrad's way of depicting African people (which has provoked some African critics such as Chinua Achebe¹⁾ and which remains controversial) can thus still be seen as more sympathetic and progressive than those of many British writers of his time.

III

"The Feast" is not simply what many critics have thought it to be — a malicious parody which mocks Conrad's faults as a writer. Rather, it can be seen as a sophisticated, elaborate criticism which brings part of Conrad's genius to light. Beerbohm was

too much of an aesthete and dandy to write a serious criticism in a conventional manner, and thus chose to express his appreciation of Conrad's talent in a jocular way. Written in 1912, this clever criticism of Conrad's works shows Beerbohm's surprisingly keen insight. "The Feast" also shows us how contemporary readers interpreted Conrad's works, and what may attract our attention is the fact that this work reflects contemporary prevailing European views on Africans and ironically serves to highlight Conrad's unusually fair portrayals of them. What we can see in "The Feast" is not Beerbohm's scathing parody of the flaws of Conrad's early prose but the witty way a sensitive reader and critic of the time, partly tainted by contemporary Africanism, expressed his admiration of Conrad.

Note

1. See Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," in Robert Kimbrough ed., *Heart of Darkness* (New York: Norton, 1988), pp.251-62.

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