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Empire and National Identity in the Victorian Age Literature

Introduction of Issue

The Victorian Age brought about the large expansion of empire for Great Britain, as the country held power over almost a quarter of the world's population at the time. Britain dominated trade with other parts of the world, and was constantly making technological and industrial advances with their newly acquired resources. Politically and socially, Britain viewed itself as one of, if not the greatest, establishments of power in the world.

With this newly developed power, the national identity of Britain during the Victorian age became more and more valuable to the British population. The economy flourished and Britain became a political powerhouse as it dominated trade and bolstered its own economy with its new territories. British citizens and government officials were proud of their country, and began to believe that they were destined to be the greatest country in the entire world. This created a mentality of dominance and greed within the country, as Britain held power over the rest of the world in resources and territory.

The development of evolutionary science also brought along a sense of nationalism, as the newfound theory of evolution created a means for the British empire to believe in concepts of social darwinism. Social darwinism was based on the belief that the strongest qualities and traits will survive the extent of time, so Eurocentric ideals were thought to be the qualities that other regions strived to achieve. Kipling's idea of "White Man's Burden" helped justify Britain's occupation of multiple African, Caribbean, and South Asian regions, stating that the morally and

intellectually superior British citizens were responsible for the development of new culture within the newly occupied regions. Violence was also rampant in Britain's treatment of foreign populations, as "violence and coercion against a native population was perceived in the western world as legitimate" (Accominotti, et al, 49). These social cues and ideas of colonialism served as a justification by the British for their discrimination of their acquired populations, along with harming the preservation of the regions' pre existing cultures. Since the British had already established themselves as the dominant power in the world, their influence on other regions felt justified.

Discussion of Two Authors

British imperialism and its impact is reflected through the multiple works of literature written during the time period that detailed the aftermath of British colonialism. The impact felt by the inhabitants was partially dependent on the previously established culture in the territory that Great Britain acquired. In "The Proclamation of an Irish Republic" economic power seemed to serve as the main reason that Britain interfered with the Irish population. By focusing on power and resources, Britain refused to assimilate the Irish into their culture and create a welcome environment. Instead, Britain was viewed as "an alien aristocracy, who, treating us as foes, usurped our lands, and drew away from our unfortunate country all material riches" (Anonymous, 692). Economy seems to be the biggest problem for the Irish, as their materials are taken by the British.

The Irish people condemn Britain for their intervention, and argue that they will one day come to pay for their mistreatment of the populations that they have inhabited during the Victorian Age. Stating that "history bears testimony to the intensity of our sufferings" (693),

Ireland accuses Britain of taking priority over the wealth and power of their own people instead of the wellbeing of their constituents. Economic power should not be the biggest priority when there is poverty and starvation rampant in the land that Britain has acquired.

Despite the fact that Ireland suffered greatly under British rule, culture was not strongly affected. Ireland held a shared European culture with England, so different concepts of race and cultural diversity did not come into play in Britain's ownership of Ireland for the most part. There is a stark difference in Britain's treatment of the human populations in European territories versus their treatment of populations in areas like Southeast Asia, and the Caribbean.

In regards to regions occupied by Britain that had cultures vastly different than its own, William Howard Russel's "Diary in India" details the results of British nationalism and conquest upon Indian soil. Russel's diary recounts the aftermath of a deadly revolt on the British government by the inhabitants of Cawnpore. Russel states that at the heart of Britain's conquest, economic power is what drives their motives. Despite Britain's claims that they wish to improve the soil of lands that are more impoverished than them, "the action of the Government in matters of improvement is only excited by considerations of revenue" (Russel, 691).

The concepts of social darwinism also come into play in Russel's experience in India. Russel feels a sense of tension between what he feels Britain has done that serves as good work for India, yet there still exists a large amount of poverty and suffering in the region. Britain's social conduct has been set in place, as Russel states that "we have put down widow-burning, we have sought to check infanticide, but I have travelled hundreds of miles through a country people with beggars and covered with wigwam villages" (692). He is struck with the disappointing realization that Britain should have cared about the wellbeing of the population of Cawnpore so

that they could sustain themselves. Instead, they focused more on eradicating Indian culture and forcing the population to stay in poverty and to adhere to new social rules under the British government. Russel even questions whether or not the conquest of India is beneficial to Britain's economy and power, especially after the Indian population massacres the British troops that infringed upon their land. Realizing that Britain has made many dark mistakes in the attitude towards the members of Cawnpore, Russel says that "the grave, unhappy doubt which settles on my mind is whether is the better for our rule" (691).

Application to Author Outside the Section

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, written after the Victorian Age had ended, reflects the mindset and potential dangers of British imperialism at the end of the novel. Following the story of a journey into the deserts of Africa, the impacts of British imperialism in different cultures is shown in Conrad's writing. Through his description of Kurtz, Conrad depicts a perspective of Great Britain's rule that could eventually devolve into horrific actions and consequences.

When Kurtz is first introduced in the novella, he is spoken of as a great, wise being who can give advice to those who need it. This is reflective of Britain's great power at the time, where other countries looked up to them and sought to become as powerful as it was. Eventually, Kurtz is revealed to have been power hungry, forcing those who have come under his power to worship his every action and to plunder the surrounding land in order to bring him riches. Reflecting Britain's efforts to assimilate foreign cultures into its own, Conrad reveals the selfish motives behind the effort. Rather than wanting to enlighten the minds of populations different than its own, Britain sought to create a group of populations that would benefit its original state and hand

over their resources for external trade. There was no true kindness in the sharing of culture, just manipulation by Great Britain.

At the end of the novel, Kurtz swiftly descends into madness. His perspective on the land that he has been living changes, and he begins to antagonize his constituents. He no longer sees his followers as beneficial, and he seeks to kill them instead. Knowing that he cannot hold power over them any longer, Kurtz longs to destroy the forces that go against him. The natives lose their humanity as Kurtz screams to those around him to "exterminate all the brutes!" (Conrad, 121) Kurtz's demise portrays Conrad's idea of where Great Britain's empire could go if it becomes too powerful and self-serving to actually support the populations that it holds ownership over. Despite Britain's increasing power and wealth that was incentivizing their colonization of different world regions, its citizens had general concern for the outcomes of their political conquest during the end of the 19th century.

Works Cited

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