Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica, 2, 1 (2010) 101-106

Going Native – A Comparative Study Based on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Joseph Roth's *Das falsche Gewicht*

Vilma-Irén MIHÁLY

Sapientia University
Department of Humanities
vilma_gote@yahoo.com

Abstract. As the title suggests, the study is aimed at comparing two literary texts—Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Joseph Roth's *Das falsche Gewicht* with respect to the motif of *going native*. The term *going native* refers to the fears of European people living in colonies, such as being absorbed by the life and culture of the colonized country, which would result in their own degeneration and contamination. This process is therefore being seen as a sin against the law of delimiting the own civilized world from the foreign primitive culture. Both texts present all elements that are specific to the motif of *going native*, yet, whereas Conrad remains true to the tradition of colonial discourse, Roth will systematically deconstruct the topos.

Keywords: going native, colonial discourse, foreign, culture

The term *going native* refers to the colonizer's fear of contamination by absorption into native life and customs (in the following Ashcroft et al. 115). The construction of native cultures as primitive, savage or degenerate in a binary discourse of colonizer vs. colonized led, especially around 1900, to a general fear of *going native* amongst colonizers in colonial societies. There are term variations such as *going Fantee*—meaning to adopt the ways of the native Fantee, a large tribe who lived south of Ashantee on the Gold Coast of West Africa—, or *going troppo*—meaning the adoption of a primitive lifestyle, this latter having its origins in Darwin, Australia where the humidity of the wet season leads to severe

BDD-A7452 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:53:57 UTC)

discomfort with increased irritability and aggression, so that people can go 'troppo' or crazy. These variants suggest that associations with other races or just the mere climate of colonies in hotter areas can lead to moral and/or physical degeneration. The colonizers abroad were particularly terrified by the temptation of engaging in sexual relations with the natives; an act which they believed would invariably lead to the contamination of their own racial and ethical purity. Sexual intercourse with a native woman was considered a serious threat to the wholesomeness and purity of the white race. The notion of *going native* often also includes lapses from European behaviour, the partaking of native rituals and the practice of local customs such as food, dress and entertainment (Caslin 1).

Both literary texts to be discussed here—Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Roth's *Das falsche Gewicht*—stage the crossing of the line between the civilized European world and foreign primitive cultures.

Conrad's novella, written in 1899, is a foundational text on the subject of colonialism. The novella begins and ends in London; the most part, however, takes place in the Congo. A group of men are aboard an English ship, the Nellie, which is sitting on the Thames. The group includes a lawyer, an accountant, a captain, and a man without a specific profession who is named Marlow. The narrator appears to be another unnamed guest on the ship. While waiting for the wind to pick up the boat, Marlow begins to narrate his personal experience in Africa, which led him to become a freshwater sailor and gave him a terrible glimpse of colonization.

Roth's novel, *Das falsche Gewicht*, published in 1937, relates the downfall of Anselm Eibenschütz, a calibrator who, pressured by his wife, leaves the military and moves to the small town of Zlotogrod situated in Galicia on the border with Russia. As a calibrator, Anselm Eibenschütz has to control the small handler's gauges. It is difficult for him to fulfill his duty because in the border region of Zlotogrod people regard him as the enemy. Nevertheless, he succeeds in arresting Leibush Jadlowker, an outlaw. Eibenschütz falls in love with Euphemia, a gipsy woman, the former lover of the imprisoned Jadlowker. He is even going to abandon his family just to be with her. As a result, his wife and his stepson die of cholera later on. Eibenschütz himself begins to drink and fails to do his duty. He spends most of his time drinking in the border inn, which he gets to manage. Instead of watching out for criminals, he even protects them. Several smugglers and deserters pass through without being questioned or bothered by Eibenschütz. The last scene shows how the escaped Jadlowker kills Eibenschütz. The last thing the calibrator sees is he himself as a handler using wrong gauges and weights. He is being judged by the great calibrator and though they are wrong, his admeasurements are found good.

There are three parallels that can be drawn between the two texts. The first one is represented by the depiction of nature and landscape in Africa and Galicia. In both texts nature appears as a dangerous and overwhelming force. Marlow's

BDD-A7452 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:53:57 UTC)

journey leads into the African wilderness and can be regarded as a trip back into an archaic world which transposes the Europeans into a pre-civilized state (Hartmann 58). Africa becomes a "place of darkness" to Marlow (Conrad 71):

> The vision seemed to enter the house with me—the stretcher, the phantom-bearers, the wild crowd of obedient worshippers, the gloom of the forests, the glitter of the reach between the murky bends, the beat of the drum, regular and muffled like the beating of a heart—the heart of a conquering darkness. It was a moment of triumph for the wilderness, an invading and vengeful rush . . . (Conrad 152)

Similarly, Eibenschütz's arrival in Galicia turns out to be a movement into a foreign geographical area with extreme climate that unleashes unknown urges and feelings. Therefore, it is luring and destroying at the same time (Hartmann 58). Whereas in winter the icy cold and the endless darkness are the factors that turn this region into an inaccessible fortress to a foreigner, in summer the warmth and the scent of chestnuts embrace the foreigner so that s/he is led to perform irrational and unintended actions. The literary description of nature in Africa and Galicia levels off the differentiation between a civilization built upon discipline and sublimation and a periphery that goes precisely against these civilizing fundaments (Hartmann 58).

Secondly, in both texts these foreign regions—together with nature—are being feminized and sexualized. The dark continent of the colonized land is conflated with feminity.

The figure of Kurtz's African lover symbolizes the whole African wilderness:

> She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul. (Conrad 137)

Eibenschütz in his turn sees in Euphemia the embodiment of Galicia itself. She appears to him as a creature of the night and of sin, embodying thus the Galician darkness and lawlessness as well as the sensuality of this land: "Es roch betäubend süß nach Akazien, und es war Eibenschütz, als kämen alle Gerüche dieser Frühlingsnacht von der Frau allein, als hätte sie allein dieser ganzen Nacht Düfte und Glanz und Mond zu vergeben und alle Akazien der Welt" ["There was a sweet scent of acacia in the air and to Eibenschütz it felt as if all the odour came

BDD-A7452 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:53:57 UTC)

from that one woman alone, as if she had lent the night its smell, glamour and the moon with all the acacia in the world"] (JRW 175).

Through combining feminity and a geographical region dominated by the Habsburgs, Roth reproduces central components of colonial literature (Hartmann 59). He even describes a rape-scene that could be understood as the Austrian claim to subjugate the Galician periphery.

Thirdly, Eibenschütz gets addicted to Euphemia as much as Kurtz becomes a slave of the African world: "When I had a chance I begged him to try and leave while there was time; I offered to go back with him. And he would say yes, and then he would remain; go off on another ivory hunt; disappear for weeks; forget himself amongst these people—forget himself—you know" (Conrad 131).

Besides nature and women, there is a third factor that contributes to the downfall of Eibenschütz, namely alcohol. His excessive drinking leads to his physical, mental and moral decline. The once so honest calibrator develops into a disoriented, malicious person. He is aware of the fact that he is a lost person.

Kurtz is also to be regarded as a lost individual: "You will be lost," I said—"utterly lost" (Conrad 143). Whereas Eibenschütz's disorientation is limited to his duty, the African wilderness awakes in Kurtz his deepest instincts and leads him towards cannibalistic practices (Hartmann 59).

Apart from the differences between the two texts, we can witness a degeneration process in both cases. The colonized land is identified as a world of urges and vices, amoral and in decline, where the civilized Europeans must protect themselves (Hartmann 59).

Yet, the reason Roth unfolds the motif of *going native* so thoroughly, is to deconstruct it (Hartmann 60). Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* can undoubtedly be regarded as a success story (Hartmann 60). The novella illustrates the way in which the white male individual overcomes his crisis of identity. This is particularly true for Marlow, who, despite of the fact that he experiences the degenerating power of the African wilderness, succeeds in preserving his self-control and his identity—he repairs the steamboat and navigates up the river. The fact that Marlow is able to talk about his journey shows us the victory of the civilized world over the dangerous Africa and, furthermore, it indicates that despite the ambiguity of the text and the inherent criticism of the eradication of the Congo, Conrad's novella is ideologically part of the colonial discourse. The character of Kurtz also underlines the existence and functioning of a strong western subjectivity. Although he trespasses the line between civilization and barbarity, and thus loses his inhibitions, beliefs and fears, he succeeds, in Marlow's opinion, through this trespassing to gain a dreadful but heroic greatness. He manages to take a glimpse into the real nature of himself, of all human beings and of the whole universe, concluding in his last words: "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad 157). Conrad's novella presents the motif of *going native* as a journey that lets us recognize the terrifying nature of the

BDD-A7452 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:53:57 UTC)

human being and of the world. Kurtz's nihilism makes him, in Marlow's eyes, an exceptional man (Hartmann 61).

Whereas in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* the western civilized subjects are strengthened, in spite of the parallels, Roth's text will deconstruct this imperial subject model (Hartmann 61).

Anselm Eibenschütz is not Marlow. The calibrator has no sense for self-preservation and does no systematic work to protect himself against moral and physical decline. He fulfills his duty but this does not function as sublimation nor does it consolidate his identity. It becomes a way of getting near Euphemia and gives him an opportunity to drink.

Secondly, Anselm Eibenschütz is not Kurtz. At first, it seems as if the calibrator would come to some sort of self-awareness:

> Die meisten sterben dahin, ohne von sich auch nur ein Körnchen Wahrheit erfahren zu haben. . . . Manchen aber ist es vergönnt, noch in diesem Leben zu erkennen, was sie eigentlich sind. Sie erkennen es gewöhnlich sehr plötzlich, und sie erschrecken gewaltig. Zu dieser Art Menschen gehörte der Eichmeister Eibenschütz. [Most people die without having ever taken a glance of the truth. . . . Yet, some are given the chance to realize what they really are, while still alive. Usually, it is a sudden revelation and they get scared. The calibrator, Eibenschütz was such a man.] (JRW 187)

Yet, as a result of his excessive drinking, this attempt remains unfulfilled and loses its credibility. Contrary to Marlow and Kurtz, the calibrator will not win the battle against moral decline. He loses the battle and he loses himself. He dies as a victim of a horrible murder and does not leave a trace behind. He can neither relate his story nor is he going to be remembered by people the way Kurtz is.

In the end, Roth's text goes against a clear antithesis between the wilderness of the periphery and the civilized center that characterizes the colonial discourse. The eastern corner of the Habsburg Monarchy is a region of lawlessness, yet, it is not barbaric. Roth deconstructs the stereotype of civilization-border. He presents the calibrator as a cruel person who blindly follows the law, in contrast with the Galician people, who are outlaws from the point of view of the central power, yet, who are equal to each other through their joint lawlessness.

Therefore, one can conclude that Roth negates Conrad's thesis which says that identity constituted as a result of trespassing borders would be a strong one. *Das falsche Gewicht* quotes central themes and motifs of the colonial discourse in order to deconstruct them in the end.

BDD-A7452 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:53:57 UTC)

Notes

1. Both authors come from a historic region called Volhynia, which today belongs in part to the Ukraine, in part to Poland. The difference is that Conrad (1857-1924)—by his real name in concordance with his Polish origin Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski—was born in its Russian dominated part, whereas Roth (1894-1939)—Joseph Moses Roth of Jewish descendance—in the Austrian one. At some point in their lives both authors had to leave their native country and they both travelled a lot all over the world, gathering various experiences and precious material for their works. Joseph Roth seems to have been familiar with Conrad's life and work. In an article entitled *Geschenk an meinen Onkel* (1928) he reflects upon how they both come from the same region and the fact that they both had to leave (Hartmann 57).
2. In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* one can clearly differentiate between the European colonizer and the African colonized world. This distinction, however, is not that obvious in Roth's novel. In this case there is a sharp contrast between center and periphery within the Habsburg Monarchy, and thus between Western and Eastern Europe, civilized and primitive cultures. Yet, the political, financial and moral relationships between these centers and peripheries resemble those of colonizer vs. colonized. Therefore, peripheral regions can be regarded as interior colonies of the Habsburg Monarchy, making up for the fact that they did not have any outer colonies as other great powers did (Ruthner et al. 10).

Works cited

Ashcroft, Bill, et al. *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

Caslin, Sinead (2010). *The Imperial Archive. Key Concepts in Postcolonial Studies* '*Going Native*'. <http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofEnglish/imperial/key-concepts/Going-native.htm. > 15 May 2010.

Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library. <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/ConDark.html.>15 May 2010.

Hartmann, Telse. *Kultur und Identität, Szenarien der Deplatzierung im Werk Joseph Roths*. Tübingen, Basel: A. Francke, 2006. 51-66.

Roth, Joseph. Werke. 6 Bd., Hackert/Westermann, Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch 1989-1991. JRW I-VI.

Ruthner, Clemens, et al. *Kakanien revisited*. *Das Eigene und das Fremde (in) der österreichisch—ungarischen Monarchie*, Tübingen and Basel: A. Francke, 2002. 1-12.

BDD-A7452 © 2010 Scientia Kiadó
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 12:53:57 UTC)