

This Sin Can Destroy An Empire  
Exploring Homosexuality and Masculine in Victorian England

By Justin Holliday



The first Act of *Cloud 9* by Caryl Churchill takes place during the Victorian era, a period associated with social repression; this part of the play is set in Africa. When the British colonized the continent, most of the colonists were men who formed homosocial relationships. Although these relationships were not necessarily homoerotic, Harry Bagley's erotic encounters with other male characters indicate a bond found only between men, regardless of age or race. According to Michel Foucault, homosexuality during the nineteenth century was "transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul" (qtd. in Dellamora 266). Harry outwardly acts the part of the ideal Victorian man because he is an explorer, representing the British Empire. However, his secret homosexual desires violate nineteenth-century social norms, resulting in a dualistic characterization that encapsulates both the masculine and the feminine. These homoerotic encounters indicate his greed to "conquer" other male characters, similar to the conquest involved in imperialism; in effect, he colonizes male bodies.

Similarly, the male characters in *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad colonize Africa and the bodies of the indigenous people, forming homosocial relationships, and attaining a nebulous status that suggests latent homosexual desires. Conrad's characters do not express open homoerotic feelings, but in Churchill's play Harry's homosexual desires are perverse according to Victorian norms, and having sexual intercourse with other men is a form of rebellion, which poses a threat to the superficial stability of the British Empire. This upheaval against strict Victorian norms signifies Harry's desire for personal freedom. Because of the sexual repressiveness of the era, he uses his sexual desires to disrupt the outward stability of the empire by claiming as many male bodies as he can. However, he ultimately surrenders his freedom, which reveals the great, insurmountable power of the British Empire during the nineteenth century while the degeneracy of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* complements the insurmountable imperial construct because the lust that empire breeds leads to his own destruction.

Harry presents a contrast between "masculine" heroism and "feminine" or "effeminate" sexual proclivities. During the Victorian period, male effeminacy was synonymous with homosexual desires (Dellamora 267). Therefore, Harry's outward masculinity should code for heterosexuality, but he defies the stereotype by having "effeminate" sexual proclivities unlike

Clive. As the patriarch, Clive hails Harry as a paragon of manliness because Harry is a self-reliant explorer. Ironically, as an explorer, Harry eschews the Victorian ideal of a family under one household, yet Clive upholds Harry's virility anyway because Harry exhibits "masculine" strength.

Harry's role as an explorer extends beyond the metonymic exploration involved in colonialism; in fact, his deviant sexual pursuits are a type of exploration because sexual intercourse with members of the same sex is purportedly as foreign to the Victorians as the culture of the African nation in which they inhabit. Still, Clive values his relationship with Harry over his relationship with his wife Betty because their friendship is "the noblest form of relationship" (Churchill 51). According to Clive, homosociality takes precedence over the family despite his upholding of a traditional familial structure, which necessarily includes a wife and children. He describes homosocial relationships between men in terms of "sharing adventures, sharing danger, risking their lives together" (Churchill 51). All of his descriptions illustrate ideal masculine traits, implicitly referring to Harry's explorations. However, Harry misconstrues Clive's affirmation of homosociality as an affirmation of homoeroticism, resulting in his failed seduction of Clive. Consequently, Clive clarifies the distinction between friendship and sexuality, revealing the supposed femininity of homosexuality as diametrically opposed to masculine, homosocial friendship.

In *Heart of Darkness*, however, Conrad contrasts this ideal of masculinity in Victorian Africa in his depiction of the nameless, foppish accountant that Marlow meets. While Clive denigrates men with feminine attributes, Marlow affirms that the dandy resides in "the great demoralization of the land... [but] his starched collars and got-up shirt-fronts [are] achievements of character" (Conrad 2340). Marlow avers that the Congo presents a moral danger for Europeans, so he attributes the accountant's feminine appearance to European morality because, through European fashion, he removes himself from the foreign land, which "demoralizes" Europeans, perhaps leading to a sense of turpitude or at least the loss of a former, stable European mental framework. For example, Marlow, who exposes himself to the land, feels out of place in Europe and cannot tell Kurtz's fiancé about his death because it "would have been too dark—too dark altogether" (Conrad 2385). According to this reasoning, Africa presents a threat to Europeans so that they lose their former European probity. This Eurocentric mindset also explains

Harry's desire to refute the strictures of Victorian England. He experiences moral darkness as the characters in *Heart of Darkness* do and gives in to his seemingly primal passions, which manifest as his sexual conquests.

Harry's sexual relationship with nine-year-old Edward is the first example of his male conquests, connecting homosexuality and pedophilia on a continuum of sexual deviation, which adds the layer of age difference to emphasize Harry's dominance. While Harry is a figure of masculinity, Edward is so feminine that a woman plays his role. This disruption between the sex of the character and the actor playing him indicates the dichotomy that Victorian gender norms dictate. Because of the rigid expression of masculine behavior for men, a boy who engages in seemingly feminine behaviors, such as playing with a doll, cannot be fully represented as male. Despite Clive's realization of Harry's homosexuality, Clive never makes the connection between his friend's sexuality and his son's effeminacy although he believes that "[e]ffeminacy is contagious" (Churchill 52). Clive symbolizes the ideal function of imperialism, wherein homosocial relationships abound without any sexual connotation. Thus, Clive, the representative of the imperial construct, considers feminine mannerisms a learned behavior and a potential danger to the empire. Nevertheless, Harry's influence becomes evident when Edward tells Clive that instead of being soldier, he would "rather be an explorer" (Churchill 48). Edward, therefore, subverts imperial authority while outwardly asserting a claim to what Clive views as masculinity. Because Harry acts as a model for Edward, Edward's desire reveals that, according to Harry, homosexuality acts as a contagion "like a disease," in this socially repressed world (Churchill 52). Because they are in Africa like the characters in *Heart of Darkness*, the Eurocentric mindset that Clive advocates reaffirms the fear of the demoralization of Europeans who spend too much time in Africa.

Nevertheless, Edward's desires complicate this pedophilic relationship. He expresses interest in Harry and even wants to tell others about their relationship, showing that Edward does not yet fully acknowledge the repression of Victorian society. When Edward tells Harry about his adventurous fantasy, which ends with a crocodile biting off Harry's leg, Edward claims that by the end of the fantasy, he has "[f]orgotten] about the leg by then" (Churchill 33). This passage suggests that Edward understands that his relationship with Harry is incomplete. If Harry's leg symbolizes a phallus,

Edward's ability to forget the erotic component of his relationship with Harry in favor of an exciting adventure affirms the identity of Edward as a child. As a child, he is a body too young to fully understand the import of his relationship with Harry, the effects of imperialism, or his own status as a colonized body. Additionally, the brutality of his fantasy also reveals the dangers of both homosexual relationships and of Africa according to the Victorian mindset. Nevertheless, this interpretation about Edward's subconscious understanding does not discount his overt desire to have a homoerotic instead of a merely homosocial relationship with Harry, confirming Edward's eschewal of the masculine ideals that his father typifies and encourages.

Harry also has a sexual relationship with Joshua, the African servant, which reasserts his purpose of colonizing male bodies since the servant's body is an African body, providing a symbolic referent to the Europeans' colonization of Africa. Since Europeans fear the supposed demoralizing influence of Africa, Harry copulating with Joshua reflects his loss of morality as a form of distancing himself from Europe in favor of immersing himself in base concupiscence. While he and Edward only intimate the sexual nature of their relationship, Harry reveals their relationship more explicitly when Harry tells asks him, "Shall we go in a barn and fuck? It's not an order" (Churchill 21). Because of Joshua's status as a servant, Harry disrupts the racial hierarchy that imperialism has constructed. In a conversation with Clive, he tells Harry that homosexuality can "destroy an empire" and that it is a "betrayal of the Queen [Victoria]" if he has sex with the indigenous people (Churchill 52, 53). If he has sex with a servant, Harry lowers his social status, an idea he emphasizes by offering rather than demanding sex. When speaking to Joshua, Harry's diction indicates that he views his relationship with Joshua as closer to an egalitarian, homosocial friendship rather than a master-servant relationship, hearkening back to Clive's claim of friendships between men as the noblest type of dyad. Because a white actor plays Joshua, however, the idea of egalitarianism between these characters is not as drastic in a Victorian context, but Joshua is a servant and an African. Thus, Harry "conquers," or even colonizes, a native who is only outwardly white because of the influence of Eurocentric imperialism. Whether he offers or demands sex, Harry must be the one to initiate sexual contact to maintain his European dominance, regardless of the nature of their personal relationship as two men. Additionally, going into a barn to have sexual intercourse signifies not only the secrecy of their sexual acts, but also

the purported perversion of homosexuality because animals reside in barns. Therefore, their sexual relationship, which does not fit in with the Victorian model of relationships, reduces them to livestock rather than people.

While Harry's relationship with Joshua provides merely sexual gratification and dominance, his relationship with Edward adds a perverse romantic layer; the Russian harlequin in *Heart of Darkness* parallels the possibly romantic relationship between Kurtz and himself. The relationship between Kurtz and the harlequin reflects the power of both homosociality and imperialism when they "come together unavoidably, like two ships becalmed near each other, and lay rubbing sides at last" (Conrad 2369). Comparing their relationship to ships forges the connection that they are independent vessels that cannot control themselves, much as Harry appears unable to control his sexual desires. When the "ships" rub against one another, Marlow intimates a level of physicality in the relationship between the harlequin and Kurtz, and the harlequin's explanation that he has nursed Kurtz reiterates the physical element of their relationship. Also, the harlequin vehemently denies any sexual connection to Kurtz when Marlow muses, "Ah, he [has] talked to you of love" (Conrad 2369). The harlequin's fervent denial of a homosexual relationship reveals the fear of sexual deviance and the accusation of being a sexual deviant at the risk of losing one's status as a "masculine" man. Similarly, Harry keeps his homosexual relationships secret so that he may retain his dominance as a European man. Because Marlow is the narrator, the harlequin's relationship with Kurtz remains indefinite, but his devotion to another man implies feelings that extend beyond friendship.

In both texts, Victorian men strive either to be or to appear masculine, but Marlow compares Kurtz's materialistic greed to femininity, which creates a parallel between Kurtz and Harry. According to Marlow, Kurtz's "grubbing for ivory" renders him as vulnerable as an "enchanted princess sleeping in a fabulous castle" (Conrad 2359). Avarice leaves Kurtz unaware of the danger that Africa poses to both his body and his morality, so Kurtz subverts himself into a feminine figure. He cannot exemplify masculinity because his conquest renders him blind to the demoralization of Africa that the accountant ironically escapes despite his femininity. However, the accountant removes himself from the degeneracy that Africa imposes on Europeans while Kurtz immerses himself in it, thereby distancing himself from not merely European civilization, but his Victorian paradigm of masculinity

and morality.

Harry, on the other hand, retains and even accentuates his masculinity through his greed for the dominance of male bodies. As the imperialists gain control of other human beings, Harry does the same through sex, but he rebels against the Victorian ideal, permitting him even greater dominance when he seems to escape those norms by going to Africa. Still, his control extends only to the characters with whom he has sexual contact, and he must keep his "conquests" secret, or he shall lose his control, for Clive symbolizes the Victorian values that Harry cannot fully escape. Although Harry acknowledges to Edward that their sexual contact is sinful, his failed seduction of Clive provides Clive the opportunity to remind Harry that his time spent in Africa has caused his "perversions." Harry solidifies this point when he asks, "Where can I go except into the jungle to hide?" (Churchill 52). Harry has become a part of Africa in his quest for individual freedom, and he concedes that he can only find solace in the place that has supposedly caused the manifestation of his sexual degeneracy, signifying his psychological separation from England and Victorian values.

To put a stop to Harry's non-Victorian sexual practices, Clive instructs him to marry a woman so that Harry may reclaim Clive's version of normative society and thus a sense of European morality. Although Harry consents to marry Edward's governess Ellen, he affirms, "I suppose getting married wouldn't be any worse than killing myself" (Churchill 53). After discovering the liberty of dominating, or colonizing, male bodies, Harry feels resigned to returning to Victorian principles, equating a morally strict lifestyle to suicide. Despite his attempts to explore Africa and his identity, Harry must succumb to the strictures of English society in an attempt to regain a sense of Victorian morality, which Kurtz cannot do because he dies in Africa, separated from a moral European influence, condemned to reside in the place of African demoralization.

The end of the first act reveals the subverting effect of Harry's version of colonization through the actions of Edward and Joshua, his male sexual partners. Clive repeatedly expresses his disappointment with Edward when his son engages in traditionally feminine behaviors, such as playing with a doll. When Edward claims that he has kept Betty's necklace to protect it from theft, Clive responds that Edward's actions are "very manly" (Churchill 59). When Harry steps on the doll under the table while near Ellen, his action signifies the

end of his sexual relationship with Edward while simultaneously reaffirming the secrecy of their sexual relationship by destroying this feminine, symbolic evidence.

Afterward, Joshua comes in, pointing a gun at Clive in an attempt not merely to destroy the man who has disrupted his life with Eurocentric ideas, but also to upset the power structure of the British Empire because Clive represents both Victorian values and the empire. Instead of preventing the violence, Edward, the only character aware of the danger, warns nobody. Since Harry has shown him sexual liberty, Edward may believe that his father's death will erase his main obstacle from achieving individuation apart from Victorian ideals, but when he covers his ears, he exhibits a moral dilemma, reminding the audience of his Englishness, or moral compass. In contrast, Joshua, whom Harry has also taught liberty, utilizes a phallic symbol to assert his masculinity and even his foreign wildness, ostensibly setting him apart from the Europeans as a savage. Both cases reveal that Harry has achieved the goal of colonizing Edward and Joshua and altering their belief systems enough to disrupt the imperial structure, consequently exposing the insecurity of the British Empire.

While the characters uphold masculinity as the ideal for men, the male characters show that regardless of their levels of masculinity, the empire is tenuous. Victorian principles dictate that sexual deviance, including homosexuality, upsets the equilibrium of the empire, so this mindset causes characters to allow that disruption to occur. Harry cannot control the bodies that he has colonized once he returns to the supposed stability of the Victorian world when he marries Ellen and then exposes himself to the demise of his identity apart from the empire. Social repressiveness clashes with social liberty, causing Edward and Joshua to abandon their prescribed roles within the empire because of Harry's attempts at erotic conquest. Ironically, Harry himself gives up his own liberty when he reenters the Victorian world by marrying Ellen. He must cease his rebellion in his pursuit for individual freedom now that he has conformed to English expectations rather than fulfilling his personal desires. In contrast, Kurtz's attempt to fulfill his personal, materialistic desires, shows how he succumbs to Africa unlike Harry, who succumbs to Victorian values. Still, Kurtz's death in Africa reflects the near death of Harry's Englishness as Africa attempts to "demoralize" Europeans. Although Harry successfully exposes the instability of the empire through his process of colonization, he capitulates to the empire and its

far-reaching power at the end of the act, showing that Victorian ideals often override personal freedom even if some characters overcome these strictures.

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