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Captivity of the Mind:

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Ever since the age of Columbus, the ideas of travel, adventure, and exploration have pervaded Western consciousness. In 1933, Evelyn Waugh, a social critic and satirist (Longman 2818), published a short story entitled “The Man Who Liked Dickens” that *The Longman Anthology of British Literature* describes as “a cautionary tale of what might happen to an ordinary, if wealthy, Englishman venturing ‘beyond the pale’ of European civilization in a disastrous journey to the Amazon” (2818). This chilling story centers around the misfortune of Henty, a rich and uneducated Englishman, who gets swept along on an expedition to the jungles of Brazil. Throughout the journey, several disasters occur, but the most troubling disaster appears at first to be advantageous for Henty. All of his companions either dead or having abandoned the adventure, Henty finds himself alone, lost, and near death in the Brazilian forest without any hope for aid. However, Mr McMaster, an English-speaking half native finds him and nurses him back to health, asking only that Henty read him his Dickens’ novels in return for the care he has given. Though Henty is at first unaware of his plight, he eventually discovers that Mr McMaster is keeping him captive and will never allow him to return to England. In this story, Henty’s captivity provides a physical representation of the way in which Waugh inverts the effects of Eurocentric and universalistic thinking that postcolonial scholars generally recognize. Instead of those whose culture is being perceived through a Eurocentric or universalistic lens

experiencing “othering” and manipulation, Waugh places those consequences on those who hold the malignant mindsets.

Though in their actual definitions they are distinct from each other, Eurocentrism and universalism are closely related in their expression in this text. Broadly, Eurocentrism refers to “an inordinate emphasis on the cultural achievements of peoples of European ancestry” (Lewis). However, Anne Dobie uses the term in what Lewis would call a more “politicized way to refer to an ideology of white supremacy” when she defines it as an attitude that uses “[European] culture as the standard for what any culture should be” (212). In this definition, those who belong to European culture hold their customs and ways of living to be more “civilized” or “advanced” than other cultures. Their cultural experiences, then, become the standard by which they evaluate other cultures that they come into contact with. Universalism, however, is slightly different than Eurocentrism – it is less evaluative and functions more as an assumption than as a standard. This attitude or belief assumes that European ideals and experiences are universal (211). Within the text of “The Man Who Liked Dickens,” the actions of the European characters are largely dictated by their adherence to Eurocentrism and universalism – to their detriment.

While recounting the troubles that preceded the initiation of Henty’s journey to the Amazon, the narrator foreshadows the negative outcomes that Henty and the other European characters will experience due to their universalistic attitudes and ignorance of Brazilian culture. Mr. Necher, the biologist for the team, cannot go on the journey because his mother, who at first looks like a mad woman, intervenes. She “was on the ship before them [and]...carried a missionary journal in which she had just read an account of the Brazilian forests. Nothing could induce her to permit her son’s departure...” (Waugh 2821). This seemingly inconsequential

moment in the story becomes important to an observant reader when he or she realizes two important details about its context. First of all, Mr. Necher's mother is the first character that has shown interest in discovering the nature of Brazil; the other characters have shown interest only in preparation for or anticipation of their great adventure. Secondly, Mrs. Necher's actions are later justified by the events that transpire. The justification of the fear and hesitation expressed by the single character that seeks to understand Brazil provides a backdrop that highlights the detrimental effects of universalism, the opposite attitude.

The Eurocentric and universalistic patterns of thought in the other British characters of this text reveal themselves early on. During his preparations for his expedition, Henty's wife accompanies him while he is "choosing his equipment" (2821) and she "[insists] on his purchasing a worsted cummerbund" (2821). Her suggestion of a formal, woolen article of clothing to accompany her husband's equipment for his expedition into the hot Amazon jungle reveals her universalist assumptions. She assumes that something that is appropriate in British society must be something worth purchasing for any occasion. Later on, the gift that she gives him at their parting reveals a similar attitude; she presents him with "a pale blue, extravagantly soft blanket, in a suede case of the same colour furnished with a zip fastener and monogram" (2821). Like the worsted cummerbund, the blanket is an entirely impractical item for Henty to take to the Amazon. Furthermore, Henty's lack of response to his wife's impractical actions seems to indicate that he also shares in her universalistic assumptions. In fact, both characters do not even show much interest in knowing where exactly Henty is traveling; Henty says that he is going "somewhere in Brazil" (2821) and his wife later tells him, "Take care of yourself in wherever it is" (2821). Though they have been preparing for Henty's departure, neither character

even knew to where he was traveling, perpetuating the assumption that the location must be irrelevant – they can carry their own cultural expectations anywhere.

Though during the beginning stages of his expedition Henty demonstrates the typical effects of Eurocentrism and universalism, the details of his captivity demonstrate an inversion of the consequences of such negative mindsets. Typically, postcolonial scholars claim that Eurocentric and universalistic attitudes work to the disadvantage of the colonized when Europeans attempt to conquer a different culture (Dobie 211-212). However, this story draws attention to several negative effects that these attitudes can also have on those who hold them. Henty allows himself to be taken captive because Mr McMaster earns his trust by reflecting aspects of English culture, traits that demonstrate the young Englishman's Eurocentric evaluation of his captor. Henty's question, "But surely you are English?" (2823), in response to Mr. McMaster's "native" practices, reveals his surprise to discover that the man who had been speaking in his language and caring for him could be different than he is. However, he decides to continue to trust Mr. McMaster – though earlier he had been afraid of the other natives. Despite many warning signs – Mr. McMaster's readiness to use a gun, his reluctance to speak about Henty's departure, and his brief moments of menacing threats – Henty's continued belief in the good will of his captor until the ending of the story makes it clear that he will never escape. Henty's fundamental assumptions that Mr. McMaster is like himself and desires for Henty to be able to return to "civilization," because the native holds similar qualities (like enjoying Dickens) and speaks English, ultimately cause the Englishman to remain in a state of oppression from which he cannot escape.

Henty's captivity, though, not only represents the general oppression of Eurocentric and universalistic thinking on those who hold them, but also the specific consequences of these

mindsets that Waugh inverts. The first of these consequences that gets inverted through Henty's captivity is "othering" or "viewing those who are different from oneself as inferior beings" (Dobie 212). At first Henty demonstrates the typical results of Eurocentrism when he others the natives that he sees when he first arrives in the jungle, listing "snapshots of naked, misanthropic Indians" (Waugh 2822) along with the "bottled...snakes"(2822) that he collects with Professor Anderson. However, after Henty allows himself to be taken captive, he is the one who ends up getting othered by Mr McMaster. In Dobie's definition of othering, she explains that it often "justifies hierarchies"(212). Mr McMaster others Henty, setting up the "hierarchy" of Henty's captivity because Henty can read for him. Henty's acceptance of reading the Dickens' books aloud, a pastime he "had always rather enjoyed" (2824) while in Britain, allows Mr McMaster to begin treating him like a pet. Mr McMaster sets up an "unvarying routine" (2827) for Henty, which he must not break or Mr McMaster will withhold his food (2826), treating Henty as beneath him because he can use him to read Dickens. This othering that Henty experiences as a result of his initial acceptance of Mr McMaster, primarily because he exemplified certain British characteristics, inverts the typical consequences of such Eurocentrism.

The second specific consequence of Eurocentrism and universalism that Waugh inverts through Henty's captivity is manipulation. Instead of those who hold the Eurocentric ideas oppressing and manipulating those who are different from them, they themselves are manipulated because of the narrowness of their own mindsets. This inversion emerges in the way that Mr McMaster manipulates both Henty and the rescue party that comes to find the long-absent husband. In the case of Henty, he assumes at first that Mr McMaster has been keeping him out of kindness, telling his captor that he had "imposed [himself] on [his] hospitality for too long" (2825). However, Mr McMaster manipulates Henty for a long time because of what Henty

perceives as the tribal leader's seemingly English hospitality. Henty attempts to broach the subject of returning to Britain several times, but Mr McMaster politely dismisses the subject by saying, "My friend, any kindness I have shown you is amply repaid by your reading of Dickens. Do not let us mention the subject again" (2825). He then continuously takes advantage of Henty's ignorance of the way of the jungle, insisting that, "The Indians will not make a boat during the rainy season" (2825), a vessel which Henty needs to travel back up the river to the sea port, and once again politely dismissing Henty's distress by asking, "Did I not mention it? I forgot" (2825). Henty's reception of this polite refusal, because of his Eurocentric perception of Mr McMaster, ultimately allows his manipulation and perpetuates his captivity. Later, in much the same way, Mr McMaster also manipulates the search party looking for Henty. When they come looking for Henty, Mr McMaster drugs Henty, hides him, and then shows the search party several things that they interpret as indicating Henty's death. When the Englishmen come into Mr McMaster's village, they take from him "a little souvenir, [Henty's] watch" (2828) and "some photographs of the little cross [Mr McMaster] put up to commemorate [Henty's] coming" (2828). The text never indicates that Mr McMaster tells the search party that Henty is dead, but they interpret these signs through a universalistic and Eurocentric lens – assuming that Mr McMaster would use these signs the same way they would – which leads to their own disappointment and Henty's continued captivity.

Overall, the circumstances of this story demonstrate the negative effects of Eurocentric and universalistic thinking on those who hold to these mindsets. Rather than othering and manipulating the members of the culture with which they come into contact, the characters who demonstrate these attitudes and assumptions are themselves othered and manipulated, inverting 'the what is typically understood of these views. The narrowness of Henty's mind due to his

confined understanding only to the ways of his own culture is reflected through his consequential captivity to Mr McMaster. This tale, as viewed through postcolonial eyes, serves as a cautionary tale to those who hold narrow-minded assumptions about and evaluations of those who are different from themselves.

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