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English in the Amazon: Unhomeliness in Evelyn Waugh's "The Man Who Liked Dickens"

In the short story "The Man who liked Dickens," Evelyn Waugh describes a cultural collision deep in the jungles of Brazil. The story's narrative centers around two men, one of whom is an Englishman taking what he believes to be a temporary exploratory expedition to Brazil. The other, Mr. McMaster, is a half-Brazilian, half-white landowner who loves the Dickens books he cannot read for himself. Henty, the Englishman, leaves home to escape his wife, who loves another man, and goes on an ill-fated mission to explore the unmapped regions of Brazil. Along the way, he loses his companions and ends up sick and alone in a jungle surrounded by natives with whom he cannot communicate. Mr. McMaster, however, is an exception because he speaks English and is drawn to Henty because he too speaks English. He nurses Henty back to health and, as payment, asks him to read aloud every day from one of his Dickens novels. Through the character of McMaster, Waugh demonstrates how unhomeliness, resulting from cultural colonization and mimicry, can cause desperation and loneliness when the colonized are alienated from both the colonized and colonizing groups.

Henty, the unsuspecting and naïve visitor from England, is utterly unprepared for the collision of cultures he finds in McMaster. In the jungle, he expects to find only "savage" natives, which, at first, he finds when he still travels with Anderson, his fellow explorer. They photograph "naked, misanthropic natives" and capture snakes (Waugh 2822). They see themselves as distant observers of the native people, whom they view as specimens of study,

much like the snakes. Thus far, Henty remains separated from them by language and culture. He cannot even communicate with his guides (Waugh 2822). When Henty, sick and delirious, first meets Mr. McMaster, he says, “I expect you think I’m very odd” (2819). Henty expects to be the only English speaker in the jungle, and to be seen as a novelty by the natives. Since he believes this part of Brazil to be unexplored, he does not expect to find remnants of British culture there.

However, as Henty discovers, British cultural colonization, epitomized by Mr. McMaster, has penetrated even as far as the middle of an unmapped region of jungle. McMaster lives deep in the middle of nowhere, near a stream which “was not marked on any map” (Waugh 2819). He was the only one who had heard of the long line of colonizers of the region, and “no one except a few families of Shiriana Indians was aware of his existence” (2819). He would seem to be cut off from the outside world, but despite his apparent isolation, he carries on a legacy of British culture passed down to him by his father. Mr. McMaster had an Indian mother, but a British missionary father (Waugh 2823). His father, who left his white wife and married a native woman, brought British culture with him. It was he who brought the Dickens’ books and introduced British tastes and language to his son. Theorist Ann Dobie defines this replacement of a native culture with that of a European colonizer as cultural colonization (210). The native culture in which McMaster would otherwise have been raised were “supplanted by imitations of those of the colonizer” (Dobie 208). In McMaster’s case, the colonizer was his father, who created a pocket of British culture in the Amazon jungle.

This cultural colonization leads McMaster’s mimicry. Dobie defines mimicry as “imitation of dress, language, behavior, even gestures – instead of resistance” to the colonizer (211). Pramrod Nayer defines it as “the disciplined, conscious imitation of the white man by the colonized and supposedly subservient native” (28). In other words, a colonized people imitates

and adopts the practices of the colonizer, whom they have been taught to view as superior. McMaster has adopted the British language and customs his father introduced. Speech becomes one way he mimics the British. When Henty first meets McMaster, he is sure he must be English because he speaks the language so well (Waugh 2823). The Brazilian landowner casually uses words like “practically,” “apparent,” “commemorate,” “regard,” and “etiquette.”

The most prominent way McMaster practices mimicry, however, is through his obsession with Dickens. The colonized often learn that the colonizer’s culture, including art and literature, is superior to their own, leading them to prefer the colonizer’s art over their own (Dobie 216). McMaster possesses a collection of almost all Dickens’ novels. The books are his one link to his father and his father’s culture. Unfortunately, since he cannot read them on his own, he must find people to read to him. Necessity leads to his delight in finding Henty, who can read to him in a real British accent. McMaster is fascinated with Dickens and never tires of his books. They are the only books he has ever read, and he seems quite content to keep it that way. His love of these books is unusual because Dickens is an emphatically British author, concerned with British social issues and practices. Henty notes that McMaster’s questions about the books did not center on “the circumstances of the story – such things as the procedure of the Lord Chancellor’s Court or the social conventions of the time, though they must have been unintelligible” (Waugh 2824). McMaster hides his ignorance about British culture by ignoring the fact he does not know about British society and instead asks questions about the characters. He also tries to react to the story the way an Englishman would. He laughs at the humorous parts and cries at the sad parts, although he misses the mark and laughs in some places Henty does not find funny (Waugh 2824). McMaster tries to understand the stories by explaining them in simple comments he can relate to, such as “Mrs. Jellyby does not take good care of her children” (Waugh 2824). An

Englishman would know this right away, but because McMaster does not live in a British culture, it takes him longer to come to this conclusion, and the comment does not seem simple to him. Nevertheless, McMaster tries his best to mimic an Englishman's response to and love for Dickens.

McMaster's mimicry leads him to imitate colonization by "othering" his native neighbors. According to Dobie, "othering" means "viewing those who are different from oneself as inferior beings" (212). To "other" someone different means to look down on them as "objectionable" and strange, while "the self, by contrast, is defined as good, upright, and moral" (Dobie 209). McMaster does not identify with the Indians, even though he is half Indian himself. Throughout the story, he speaks of them as a separate and inferior people, viewing them as children. He defends this mindset by saying that most of them actually are his children from his many native wives (Waugh 2826). But McMaster takes this to the point of viewing them as lesser people who could never do anything without consulting him first, as he represents the wise patriarchal figure of the region. When Henty tries to orchestrate an escape with the natives behind McMaster's back, McMaster tells him, "they would do nothing without my authority" (Waugh 2826). Like his father, McMaster colonizes the natives of his area by assuming physical advantage and a superior attitude over them. He is a landowner. He owns a larger house than the others, "a dozen or so head of puny cattle," a cassava plantation, banana and mango trees, and a dog (2819). He also owns a gun, which is the deciding factor in his retention of power.

McMaster learns from his father, to view the Indians as inferior because they know nothing of British culture and do not have the commodities that define "superior" men.

Because McMaster, by his mimicry of the British colonizers, alienates himself from the native people, he experiences unhomeliness with regard to the Brazilian culture. Unhomeliness is

the experience of those who are part of two cultures, but fully integrated into neither. Dobie refers to them as “culturally displaced” (210). Many colonized peoples experience unhomeliness because the colonizer’s culture has so permeated their own that they identify in part with both cultures but are rejected from acceptance in either one. McMaster’s unhomeliness is accentuated because he is biologically half of each culture. McMaster belongs to both the Brazilian world, the culture of his mother, and to the British world, the culture of his father. And yet, he belongs to neither one of them. He knows about Indian herbs, the language, and the etiquette. But he is separate from the natives because of his British father and because he has set himself above them. His unhomeliness is partly of his own making since he consistently talks about the Indians in language that distances himself from their group. For example, he tells Henty that “the Indians” will not build boats during the rainy season because it is “one of their superstitions” (Waugh 2825). When he names the Indians, he does not include himself in their group, and he uses the word “their” to indicate that he does not share their beliefs.

Despite his efforts to integrate himself into the British culture through mimicry, McMaster is also unhomed in relation to it. Even his father fails to fully accept and integrate him into his culture. Although he read to his son, he never taught him how to read, though he was “a man of education” (Waugh 2823). The father’s failure to educate his son indicates that he “othered” his own family, denying them the same type of education he received. McMaster is, in a way, part of the British culture, so much so that Henty thinks he recognizes a fellow countryman in him. McMaster tries to emulate British culture by dominating the natives, speaking English, and reading Dickens. However, he is undeniably separated from Britain by physical distance. In addition, because he never lived in Britain and because he cannot read for himself, he has trouble understanding the culture fully.

This experience of unhomeliness leads McMaster to commit desperate actions to combat his aloneness and integrate himself into the British culture. He obtains British commodities from “a long succession of traders, passed from hand to hand, bartered for in a dozen languages at the extreme end of one of the longest threads in the web of commerce that spreads from Manaos into the remote fastness of the forest” (Waugh 2819). His desire to live like the English is evident by his dedication to obtaining British goods by an elaborate and difficult system. McMaster also demonstrates his desperation for integration into the British culture by deceiving and imprisoning Henty so that he can read Dickens to him, keeping him connected to Britain in a small way. In fact, before Henty, McMaster held another man against his will, whom he forced to read Dickens “every day until he died” (Waugh 2823). In order to keep Henty from leaving, he leads the visiting English search party to believe him dead, while Henty unknowingly sleeps under the influence of a drug. McMaster demonstrates his aloneness and unhomeliness by being desperate enough to use deceit and force to hold onto British culture through Dickens.

McMaster seems to represent both colonized and colonizer, creating in him a sense of unhomeliness. He unhomes himself from the Brazilian culture by mimicking the colonial attitude of his father: othering his native neighbors and believing in his own superiority over them. He mimics his father’s culture because he believes it gives him status, even though his father never shared the full benefit of his knowledge with his son. McMaster finds himself alienated from both cultures, causing a feeling of desperation that leads to his deceptive actions toward Henty. Through McMaster, Evelyn Waugh exposes the harm of introducing a foreign culture through colonization while simultaneously denying full status and benefit to the colonized. If a colonizer forces the colonized to become dependent on them, she suggests, it is unfair and cruel to deny them an equal place in the colonizer’s culture.

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