**Reading as a Postcolonialist:**

*Note:*

*To understand the discussion that follows, you should read the excerpt from Jill Ker Conway*’*s autobiography,* The Road from Coorain*, which you will find as a separate file in this section*.

A postcolonial analysis begins with the assumption that examining the relationship between a text and its context will illuminate not only the given work but also the culture that produced and consumed it. In the end, you may not agree with everything you find in either of them, but you will emerge with a deeper understanding of how and why a text is meaningful. In turn, the process gives greater validity to your judgments about a body of literature and the community associated with it. The postcolonial reader will generally be alert and sensitive to the presence of the following elements that recur in the literature.

**Presentation of Colonialism** The central question of postcolonial criticism addresses the stance of the text toward the mixed colonial culture that it depicts or that produced it. What attitudes does the text reflect regarding the colonizers and the colonized? A wide range of viewpoints is possible, for the historical development of a culture, the relationships between its cultural groups, and the daily stresses of mixing people of different backgrounds make for a complex situation. The understanding of such matters will likely be expressed in fairly subtle ways, and there may be no single unconflicted attitude, because questions of how the conquered and the conqueror can live comfortably with each other, even after years of trying, are not easily answered.

Colonialism is certainly one of the principal themes of Jill Ker Conway’s autobiographical remembrance of growing up in Australia. In *The Road from Coorain*, she not only identifies the colonialist mentalities she met (and was led to share) but also traces the means by which they were inculcated and maintained. She tells the story of her awakening to the fact that she has unconsciously absorbed colonial attitudes from her family and other families living similar kinds of lives in the outback. Her recognition of the elitism and estrangement from native life on that continent takes her by surprise as she moves from Coorain, the remote sheep farm in the bush, to Sydney after the death of her father, later to graduate school in America, and finally to her appointment as the first female president of Smith College. The awareness of the duality of her cultural roots is accompanied by the corresponding surprise of finding that being female set her apart in a similar way. Just as she was subtly informed at home and school and in society that Australia was inferior to Great Britain, so she was also confronted with implicit, and sometimes explicit, assumptions that she was less capable than the males in her world. Ironically, it was because she was female that she was allowed to pursue higher education, for, unlike her brothers, she was not expected to return to Coorain to run the sheep farm.

You can begin to examine the attitudes toward colonialism that exist in a work by asking the following questions:

■ Is the work critical of colonialism, approving of it, or ambivalent about its value?

■ Does the narrator speak as an observer or a participant in the story’s cultural setting?

■ What traditions and practices serve to maintain the cultural hierarchy in the work?

**Treatment of Characters** It is in the portrayals of colonizers and the colonized that the larger picture becomes evident. The reader can begin by asking whether the depictions are positive or negative. Whose deeds are celebrated and whose reproved? The assumptions about characters, both spoken and unspoken, will indicate whether the work supports or resists the ideology and practices of colonialism.

Conway’s depictions of the characters she knew as a girl are not simple. Some of the colorful personalities she met came to the sheep farm to work; others were landowning farmers like her parents. She remembers them with fondness, but she also recognizes that from the beginning, the class distinctions were clear and became more firmly drawn after her move to Sydney. It was the families with close English connections who stood high in the hierarchy; it was those with the most English behavior who were most admired. At Abbotsleigh, for example, the school in which Conway was enrolled after her brief exposure to public education, the headmistress, Miss Everett, represented the “European cultural ideal,” and the girls were expected to emulate her straight back, British accent, and athletic carriage. Looking back, Conway recognizes that something was lost by what she refers to as her “colonization.” She speculates that had she remained in a public school, she might “have been obliged to come to terms with the Australian class system.” She adds, “It would have been invaluable knowledge, and my vision of Australia would have been the better for it. It was to take me another fifteen years to see the world from my own Australian perspective, rather than from the British definition taught to my kind of colonial.” Though her criticism is not bitter and her depictions of Miss Everett and others at Abbotsleigh are affectionately drawn, her awareness of the limitations imposed by the colonial mentality is clear.

Insight into the attitudes of the characters can come from asking the following questions:

■ What descriptive terms characterize the depiction of the characters who are the colonizers?

■ What descriptive terms characterize the depiction of the colonized characters?

■ What is the relationship between the colonized and the colonizers in the narrative?

**Validity of the Narrative** It is important to establish whether the events are exaggerated. Is political and cultural domination presented explicitly or allegorically? Is the whole story being told? Are some elements contrary to what actually happened? Are the rationalizations believable? Knowing something about the author, including his or her background, opinions, and purposes, can sometimes be helpful in this regard.

Because *The Road from Coorain* is autobiographical, and the writer has validity in the eyes of the reader, the narrative is straightforward and rings true. The writer does not indulge in exaggeration or even satire, except for an occasional comic look at human foibles. If you are interested in testing the validity of a narrative, the questions posed in the previous paragraph can be applied to any piece of postcolonial literature.

**Expressions of Nativism (Nationalism)** Out of a desire to resurrect the precolonial culture, some postcolonial writers consciously use elements of native culture and expunge elements of the imposed one. It is one way to rediscover native identity and declare its worth. Several problems lie in this approach, however. When writers publish works written in their own language, for instance, they usually meet a limited reading audience because too few people are likely to be proficient at comprehending it. Some people also argue that the attempt is inherently flawed, because all cultures change; even without the intervention of an outside oppressor, what once was, even if one could find it out, would no longer be. Finally, postcolonial cultures are hybrid ones, and any attempt to go back to a “pure” culture is unrealistic.

Conway, writing as a native-born Australian but not as a member of the indigenous population, makes no attempt to disavow her British heritage. Instead, she writes from the postcolonial perspective of a hybrid culture that combines both the native one and the dominating one. Sometimes the contrasts she experienced make for illogical or amusing situations. For example, the requirement at Abbotsleigh that the girls wear uniforms designed for an English climate leaves them in summer in “starched green linen dresses with cream collars, the same [green flannel] blazer, beige socks, a cream panama hat, and the same brown gloves.” She continues, “Woe betide the student caught shedding the blazer or the gloves in public, even when the thermometer was over 100 degrees…. No one paused to think that gloves and blazers had a function in damp English springs which they lacked entirely in our blazing summers.” Such irrational practices left the girls, as Conway says, “only partially at home in our environment.” She is referring to the sense of unhomeliness, of being caught between two cultures and not entirely at home in either of them.

Another way of describing her situation is to say that she is experiencing double consciousness, for she has an awareness of being part of both the colonized and the colonizing cultures and thus of being the recipient of all the conflicts and contrasts that exist between them.

The following are some questions that can help the reader examine the elements of nativism in a story:

■ Does the story refer only to native elements of the culture, or does it depict a hybrid culture?

■ Which characters experience unhomeliness?

■ Where do you find instances of double consciousness?

**Recurring Subjects and Themes** Some postcolonial texts look to the past, rehearsing the pains of othering and the humiliations of mimicry. They retell the stories of the initial colonization and trace changes in the native culture. Others record the sense of double consciousness and unhomeliness experienced by those who belong to both past and present and to neither. Still other texts look to the future, reaching for a definition of the new hybrid identity (both personal and communal) and an ideology that will serve its needs. In all cases, postcolonial texts reveal the complexity of cultural identity in a colonized world.

As already noted, *The Road from Coorain* is the story of Conway’s double consciousness and unhomeliness as it evolves into a personal identity. It also points to the practice of mimicry as one of the chief ways by which the colonizer’s presence was maintained. Nowhere is that more evident than at Abbotsleigh, where Eurocentrism reigned. The school made it clear by social rules, curriculum, and the example of its leaders that England was the standard by which all people and practices were to be measured. In the formality of the dinner table (where the girls, wearing green velvet dresses, were seated in descending order of age and class), in the absence of references to Australian art and literature in their classes, and in virtually all practices at Abbotsleigh, it was British culture that was imitated and admired. For example, Conway notes that in the study of literature, she and her classmates “might have been in Sussex,” because their reading consisted of Shakespeare and Shelley, not of the writers of their own country. Australia, then, was defined by default, by what it was not. The girls were left to conclude that because its countryside did not look like the Cotswolds and the Lake Country, it must be ugly; and because its paintings were not mentioned, there must not be any. History pointed out that people of any importance lived somewhere else. The teachers dutifully corrected the girls’ speech so that it would conform to standard British pronunciation, unmarred by Australian patterns. In short, “The best standards were derived from Great Britain, and should be emulated unquestioningly.” And just in case the message was not clear, geography lessons featured maps with the holdings of the British Empire colored bright red. Obviously, the closest an Australian could come to being judged superior was by mimicry, by being British, even if only partly so.

The subjects and themes of postcolonial literature can be found by asking the following questions:

■ Does the narrative look to the past, examine the present, or hypothesize a possible future?

■ Where is imitation of the cultural standard depicted, and what is the effect of mimicry on those who are expected to practice it?

■ How do specific characters struggle to develop a personal identity by reconciling the two cultures in which they live?

**Context** Every work has a context, and studying context lies at the heart of postcolonial literary study. Whereas interpreters of a culture sometimes derive insights about it by reading its literature, a postcolonialist critic will look to almost every aspect of a culture to illuminate a text. Significant elements may be social or material; they may be drawn from the culture that produced the text or the culture of its interpreters. For the reader interested in deepening his or her understanding of a work, the process means examining the interaction of the two, which can be a time-consuming business if for no other reason than that it is difficult to know when one has done enough. The complex relationship between text and context, each a product and creator of the other, is called **negotiation.**

The context of Conway’s story and the context of its telling are not the same. That is, it is told from the distance of another country, personal independence, and intellectual growth. She has written it from the perspective of one who has moved far enough away from a place and a personal history to achieve insight that is not often found while immersed in them. It is interesting to speculate, for example, whether Conway would have been moved to write about growing up entrenched in colonialist mentality if she had not left it behind. Then, too, the changing social attitudes of the 1960s and later must have influenced her, as they did others, to question the traditional ways of evaluating what is good and what should be, a process that is important to her story. The times and her changing place have allowed her to see her past with greater clarity, and her remembrances shed light on the times, past and present.

The text and its contexts can be examined by asking the following questions:

■ Are the context of the story and the context of its telling the same or different? If different, how do they affect each other?

■ Where do you observe negotiation—that is, the impact of the context on the text and of the text on its context?

■ What significant public events in the writer’s life can be said to have contributed to his or her views?

**Minor Characters** As in the analysis of *Jane Eyre* mentioned earlier, previously unnoticed assumptions in a work can sometimes be detected by paying attention to the characters who do not hold center stage. By noting their treatment and the language used to describe them, attitudes about colonizers and colonized peoples that have gone unnoticed, especially in canonical works, may become evident.

Conway’s classmates at the public school she briefly attended are never mentioned by name, and perhaps they were never even known as individuals. In the full scope of the autobiography, they play bit parts. Nevertheless, her brief encounter with them speaks volumes about the class structure of postwar Australia. For example, the superior attitude that she naturally assumed toward them, on the basis of the stereotypes and judgments given to her by her family and their friends, is symptomatic of the elitism common to her class. The jeering schoolmates are well aware of the social gulf between them, and they reflect an authentic Australian culture that is scorned by those who have assumed the colonizers’ consciousness of class.

Minor characters can become significant when a reader asks the following questions:

■ Which minor characters typify major cultural attitudes?

■ How does the principal character view specific minor characters?

■ Where do minor characters embody cultural conflict?

**Political Statement and Innuendo** The question here is whether and how a work promotes resistance to colonialism. Does the text make ideological statements or support a particular course of political, economic, or social action? Does it take up the case for or against a particular group of people? Or does it attempt to present the complexity of the situation without taking a stand on it?

When Jill Ker Conway promotes resistance to colonialism, she does so quietly. Her book is not driven by a desire to rally crowds to march in the streets for a particular cause. Instead, it is a thoughtful recollection of how she came to recognize her own girlhood acceptance of a limited point of view that created in her, as an Australian, a sense of always being less than someone else. It was a sense of self that was derived both from her colonialist background and from growing up female. Although she names no villains or conspirators, there is no mistaking her criticism of institutionalized social practices designed to ensure an inferior status for certain groups. It is clear that she regrets the negative sense of self that was imposed on both children and adults by comparing Australia with the revered Great Britain. Her escape from such smallness of vision came with her move to the United States for graduate study and her subsequent marriage to a Canadian. Her cultural identity has continued to grow—in one sense, making for greater complexity of definition, but in another making for deeper understanding of what it means to reject the colonial mentality as one works out an individual identity. In the end, her own liberation from colonialist boundaries and definitions and her assumption of an identity that has been enriched by numerous cultures make her a model of what citizens of a shrinking world are likely to become. In that way, her autobiography provides a quiet but powerful ideological statement. The political stance of a literary work may be obvious or subtle.

The reader can identify it by asking the following questions:

■ Does the text make overt political statements? Does it openly promote a particular social or economic agenda?

■ Does it admire characters who stand for a stated cause?

■ Does it criticize those who represent a specific ideology?

**Similarities** Homi Bhabha notes the possibilities for studying world literature not in terms of national traditions but in terms of postcolonial themes that cut across national boundaries. The reader would look, for example, at whether native populations from different countries have commonalities as a result of their experience of having been colonized. This study could take a number of different forms, depending on which groups the reader chose to study.

Conway could easily be the subject of such a study, as she is not the only writer to address the issues named here. Undoubtedly, interesting comparisons could be made between her remembrances and those of others who grew up as natives in a homeland not entirely their own. Did they experience the same sense of double consciousness? Did they have the same knowledge of hybridity? Were they, too, expected to practice mimicry? For example, what correspondences and differences are to be found between *The Road from Coorain* and V. S. Naipaul’s novel *A Bend in the River*, the story of a young Indian man who moves to an isolated African town and finds himself dangerously caught up in the clash of an old regime and the new one?

To make such comparisons requires a wide acquaintance with postcolonial literature. For the reader interested in following Bhabha’s suggestion, it may be necessary to consult bibliographies of postcolonial literature to find potentially comparable works.