

## **Beyond micro analysis of pastiche: Max Beerbohm's imitation of Joseph Conrad**

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*Abstract.* It is tempting to always try to distinguish convincing from poor literary imitation by micro-analysis. The analysis observes various patterns of word and punctuation use in the original and compares those with the imitation. I argue that no such sophistication is needed when faced with Max Beerbohm's imitation of Joseph Conrad.

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*“Skin all lovely and white  
—Before the mosquito bite”*

How does one determine whether one author is imitating another? How does one distinguish good imitation from poor imitation? It is tempting to always use a kind of micro-analysis. To answer these questions, one observes patterns of word and punctuation use in the original and the imitation. How often does the author imitated use the dash for example? How large is their vocabulary? Which words appear again and again?

No doubt there are computerized tools to aid in this. But sometimes one does not need any such aids and even a work might appear a good imitation by all micro-standards but not be a good imitation in some crucial respect. Take Max Beerbohm's imitation of Joseph Conrad. Here is its opening:

The hut in which slept the white man was on a clearing between the

forest and the river. Silence, the silence murmurous and unquiet of a tropical night, brooded over the hut that, baked through by the sun, sweated a vapour beneath the cynical light of the stars. Mahamo lay rigid and watchful at the hut's mouth. In his upturned eyes, and along the polished surface of his lean body black and immobile, the stars were reflected, creating an illusion of themselves who are illusions.

(1912: 125)

Like the reader Mahamo is awake. The white man is asleep. Here is some more, from the third paragraph:

Within the hut the form of the white man, corpulent and pale, was covered with a mosquito-net that was itself illusory like everything else, only more so. Flying squadrons of mosquitoes inside its meshes flickered and darted over him, working hard, but keeping silence so as not to excite him from sleep. (1912: 126)

We are observing the white man and his situation, even feeling that he is too large for this small hut. “Chief, next time don’t capture such a large white man,” Mahamo probably wishes to complain, as do we. Here is the opening sentence of the fourth paragraph:

The white man ground his knuckles into the corners of his eyes, emitting that snore final and querulous of a middle-aged man awakened rudely. (1912: 126)

I tend to imagine all this from the perspective of Mahamo, the native. Perhaps the “rudely” is a desperate attempt to discourage that identification.

But Joseph Conrad is famous for being Eurocentric (see Achebe 2001 [1975]).

His works are from the point of view of the white man. The native is a mere background even. However close Beerbohm has got to Conrad in vocabulary and punctuation and sentence structure, quite a few paragraphs of his fiction invite a completely different identification, with the white man as the exotic Other. Assuming the image of Conrad is correct, this imitation is massively off target.

### **References**

Achebe, C. 2001 (originally 1975). An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In V.B. Leitch (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

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