

The Exploration of Darkness;  
the Darkness of the Modern World in *Kokoro* and *Heart  
of Darkness*

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In the late nineteenth century, when the concept of modernity began to prevail over the world, two writers in the East and the West, Natsume Soseki (1867-1916) and Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), shared a pessimistic view of the modern world. Observing closely the process of Japanese civilization, which proceeded by ruthless abandonment of its tradition and by excessive adaptation of Western culture, Soseki expresses his fear that the artificiality of Japanese civilization would eventually bring its people the feeling of void, frustration and anxiety ("Gendai Nihon no Kaika" 33). Conrad, on the other hand, experienced vicious Russian imperialism as a child in Poland and could not help asking for the justification of the Western expansion even after he joined the British "civilizing" mission to work in Africa as an English citizen (Watts 54). Among the works of these two authors, the two novels *Kokoro* (1914) and *Heart of Darkness* (1902) share a substantial basis for comparison; each presents an individual who struggles for life while being torn between the opposing forces of idealism and human instinct in the modern world. Furthermore, both novels deliver the story in a similar way in that they present a youth as a narrator who is anxious to explore the world by pursuing the idealism of civilization. Yet, following an enlightened figure, this narrator is forced into the darkness of reality. Thus, Soseki and Conrad present the predicament of modern man in which the journey towards enlightenment inevitably leads him into darkness—the darkness of the human heart and of the modern world.

In *Heart of Darkness*, the youth Marlow is fascinated with the idea of civilization and goes to the Congo in Africa as a member of a civilizing mission. As a child, in England, he adored maps, especially their blank spaces which indicated as of yet unexplored places, and he dreamed of going to these spaces for “the glories of exploration”(21). He admires the “real work” done there observing the map being colored with red, blue, green and orange showing the progress of the colonization. For him, going to the Congo to civilize the “savages” is the achievement of his lifelong dream. However, as soon as Marlow reaches the outer station in the Congo, he observes the brutality in the work in which black people are chained and forced to work until they die. Looking at them dying slowly, Marlow is horrified by the demoralization of the Europeans and admits that these black people are “nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation” (35) brought by civilization. In his delusion, he sees the painting of Kurtz, the first-class agent, in which he presents his Intended. She is depicted “draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch. The background was sombre—almost black. The movement was stately, and the effect of the torchlight on the face was sinister” (47). By looking at his painting, Marlow believes that Kurtz’s idealism of civilization still remains intact, and he sets off for the deeper part of the wilderness, the inner station, where Kurtz resides.

In *Kokoro*, the youth “I” comes to Tokyo to study at the university. As a young student coming to the big city, he is eager to enlarge his experience and to learn life itself. Wishing “to probe deeply into the realm of ideas,”(141) “I” has believed that education would provide him with knowledge and the truth about life. Yet, having studied in Tokyo, he cannot help feeling dissatisfied with his university education, and he begins to feel that “something [is] lacking in [his] life” (8). With this sense of uncertainty, he meets Sensei on a summer holiday in Kamakura.

Although "I" does not know anything about him, he spontaneously calls him Sensei (teacher) and believes that he can "perhaps find in him those things [he looks] for"(8), those things professors cannot teach him in a lecture. Without solid reasons, he feels a strong impulse to follow Sensei and an "irresistible desire to become close to him"(12). Thus, despite his disappointment, he returns to Tokyo, "the greatest [city] in all Japan, immersed in gloom, yet bustling with activity despite the darkness," insofar as he sees "one light shining" from Sensei's house.

Disappointed by the brutality in the work of civilization, Marlow is also amazed by the Company's chief accountant because of his dignified appearance with a "high starched collar" and "white cuffs"(36). He describes him as "a hair dresser's dummy" because his elegance suggests his indifference towards the demoralizing nature of the work. He explains to Marlow that they have to "hate those savages—hate them to the death" so as to make "correct entries"(38). In addition, at the central station, he meets the other pilgrims, whose greed and empty minds make him say that if he could poke his finger through them, he "would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt, maybe"(48). Having noticed the ethical corruption of the other white pilgrims, Marlow begins to isolate himself from them. This is metaphorically suggested by his loss of the boat, his only connection to Europe, on his way to the central station. His solitude is suggested by the way in which he goes to work the next day, "turning, so to speak, [his] back on that station. In that way only it [seems to him he can] keep [his] hold on the redeeming facts of life"(43).

His separation from other white people displaces Marlow into the unknown. His uncertain feelings are reflected in his perception of the landscape; being away from Western culture, he begins to feel affirmation towards nature. He reveals this feeling by describing "the voice of the surf" as "a positive pleasure, like

the speech of a brother. It [is] something natural, that [has] its reason, that [has] a meaning”(30). He also attains a sense of relief by looking at black people paddling. He says that “they [have] bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that [is] as natural as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there”(30). Moreover, the spectacle of nature comes to provide him with a sense of consolation. He describes it as follows:

The smell of mud, of primeval mud, by Jove! was in my nostrils, the high stillness of primeval forest was before my eyes; there were shiny patches on the black creek. The moon had spread over everything a thin layer of silver—over the rank grass, over the mud, upon the wall of matted vegetation standing higher than the wall of a temple, over the great river I could see through a sombre gap glittering, glittering, as it flowed broadly by without a murmur. All this was great, expectant, mute, while the man jabbered about himself . . . I felt how big, how confoundedly big, was that thing that couldn't talk, and perhaps was deaf as well. What was in here? I could see a little ivory coming out from there, and I had heard Mr Kurtz is in there. (49)

In experiencing the inversion of culture and nature, Marlow imagines Kurtz in the center of a magnificently figured nature, of the unknown, as a figure capable of offering the resolution of his disappointment with the real nature of Western civilization.

“I” in *Kokoro* also expresses his feeling of uncertainty through his perception of the landscape. When he finds Sensei by the sea in Kamakura, he encounters Sensei for the first time amid some confusion because a Westerner is accompanying him. Nevertheless, he is keenly interested in this Westerner because he wears only a pair of drawers, having just taken off a Japanese summer dress. The exposure of this Westerner's body strikes him as

extraordinary because he had already seen other Westerners swimming with their bodies fully covered a few days before. His uneasiness towards both the overexposed and the fully-covered, overly modest Western body suggests his anxiety towards the modern world in which Western culture is adapted to Japanese culture. When he goes to the graveyard with Sensei, he is struck by the Western name written in Chinese characters, to which Sensei does not particularly pay attention. In addition, he never fails to notice the combination of the Japanese bowls and chopsticks laid out on the European-style white linen on the dining table of Sensei's house. This attitude of his suggests what has lead him to Sensei. To "I," having failed to see the world through books, Sensei, who is accompanied by a Westerner, appears to be real as well as unknown; he appears to be the personification of the modern world that "I" is eager to explore—the world in which the two cultures collide and coexist under the concept of civilization.

The way in which "I" approaches Sensei shares a commonality with the way in which Marlow approaches Kurtz: "I" feels the necessity to isolate himself from others in order to come close to Sensei. In seeing Sensei for the first time, "I" feels a certain distance from him, a situation which he expresses by feeling that he is separated from him by the "numerous black heads moving about" between them. In this confusion, communication between them seems to be impossible. Yet, removing himself from the crowd and swimming into the sea following Sensei, he feels freedom and joy and says that "the sea stretched, wide and blue, all around [them], and there seemed to be no one near [them]" (6). "I" feels the same necessity to isolate himself from others when they go to Ueno to see the cherry blossoms. He says that there is "a large crowd around [them], and every face in it looked happy. [They have] little opportunity to talk until [they reach] the woods, where there [are] no flowers and no people"(26). As

these attitudes imply, "I," without being fully aware of it, expresses his need to separate himself from the conventional world of black heads and happy faces and draw closer to the truth in life represented by Sensei.

As Marlow sets off for the inner station, he experiences the deterioration of his identity which has been figured through an idealization of Western culture. Traveling towards the inner part of the wilderness, he loses his sense of time and space in that he feels as if he were traveling back to a prehistoric age. He says that going up "that river [is] like traveling back to the earliest beginning of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air [is] warm, thick, heavy, sluggish" (59). Moreover, as he is exposed to the unknown, penetrating "deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness"(62), he begins to lose his sense of self insofar as he comes to respond to the sound of "drums behind the curtain of the trees," and to feel "a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of heavy and motionless foliage"(62). Being surrounded by the oppressive jungle, he eventually realizes that these apparently savage people are not totally incomprehensible because there would be "this suspicion of their not being inhuman." He continues:

It would come slowly to one. They howled, and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first age—could comprehend. And why not? The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all

the past as well as all the future. What was there after all? Joy, fear, sorrow, devotion, valour, rage—who can tell?—but truth—truth stripped of its cloak of time. . . . But he must at least be as much of a man as these on the shore. He must see that truth with his own true stuff—with his own inborn strength. Principles? Principles won't do. (62-63)

Marlow's motive for going to the Congo to enlighten the native people came from his belief that their primitiveness needed to be civilized. Yet, having traveled to the center of the darkness, he has recognized their humanity and has realized that it is a Western selfish motivation which has called them "savage" in order to define its own civilization as superior, and therefore to justify colonization and the abuse of power. Moreover, he has recognized that all Westerners, under their layers of civilization, possess a "savage" quality which responds to the wildness of nature. Thus, Marlow has realized that the dark spot on the map he was looking at as a child, when he dreamed of joining the glorious exploitation, lies in his own mind, the darkness of his Western mind, implying both his moral darkness and his primitive instincts. Confronted with the truth about himself, he can only keep himself from becoming insane by blinding himself and by maintaining the idealism of white supremacy which is metaphorically suggested by the white fog concealing the "inexplicable note of desperate grief in this savage clamour"(71).

In *Kokoro*, although "I" is willing to know Sensei and to come close to him, he is often disappointed because Sensei, who despises himself, refuses any intimate relationship because of his distrust "towards the whole of humanity." Yet "I" believes that his new-found mentor's solitary way of life conveys something important and values his opinions since they are based on his own experiences and on "a strong sense of reality"(31). "I" is eager to know Sensei's past, which he believes will reveal both Sensei's

true identity and the truth about life. Yet, Sensei has “hinted only, and his hints were to [him] like a vast threatening cloud hanging over [his] head, vague in outline and yet frightening. The fear within [him], nevertheless, was very real”(31-32). His fear towards Sensei is also his fear towards the unknown truth—the truth about himself and about the modern world. Talking to his wife about Sensei’s past, of which both of them have only partial knowledge, “I” expresses his anxiety by saying, “In a sea of uncertainty, then, the comforter and the comforted floated about helplessly”(42).

After meeting Sensei, “I” travels back to his hometown twice. He goes there for the first time because of his father’s illness. Yet no sooner does he find that his father’s condition is not as bad as he had expected than the inactive life of the countryside begins to bore him. Finding himself more attached to Sensei than to his own father, he feels guilty: “For was I not of my father’s flesh?” (50), especially because filial piety is an essential teaching in the traditional ethics of Confucianism in Japan. Tokyo has changed him, and the air of Tokyo he brings with him creates an uneasiness which he describes as “introducing the smell of a Christian into the house of a Confucianist”(50). He goes back there again when he graduates from the university. Having lost his naive belief in the importance of the university education, he does not know whether his diploma represents a “symbol of the beginning of a new life” or “a meaningless scrap of paper”(69). Moreover, education, contrary to its ideal function in Confucianism, brings about the separation of parents and children. Feeling upset about his children’s indifference towards him, his father blames education for being “a means of separating children from their parents”(95). Finally, upon receiving a letter from Sensei which implies his suicide, “I” impulsively leaves his dying father for Sensei; his instinct takes over the idealism of filial piety. Thus, in leaving for Tokyo, he steps into the darkness

—the moral darkness which results from the abandonment of his father and the darkness of reality with which Sensei's letter surrounds him.

Having reached the inner station, the final destination, Marlow finally meets Kurtz. Contrary to an expectation in which he has sought resolution for his disappointment, he finds that Kurtz has degraded himself, becoming a primitive god who makes the tribe follow him. The display of human heads on the stacks around his hut shows Kurtz's power; they initiate the rituals among the "primitive" people—probably cannibalistic rituals—for his greater glory. Since Marlow has recognized the restraint of the black crew in not eating white people, his degeneration is beyond his comprehension. Moreover, his attachment to the wilderness which made him attack Marlow's boat is inexplicable. Marlow can only say that "he's mad"(93). However, having turned away from other white men, he turns mentally to Kurtz "for relief—positive relief." He describes his commitment to him as "something to have at least a choice of nightmares"(101) insofar as it leads him further into the darkness—the darkness of the human heart and of the reality of the modern world.

Kurtz's degradation comes from the situation in which, having gone to Africa where he can possess the power of god as a civilizing missionary, he has lost the moral restraint which civilization requires of the individual living in the modern world. Freud explores in *Civilization and Its Discontents* the conflict between the demands of human instinct and restraint imposed by civilization. He explains that beneath the conscious surface of human minds, there are primitive impulses and the phenomena of civilization is mere sublimation of these instincts. Kurtz has initially gone to the Congo as a first-rank agent with the "high" purpose of sending "in as much ivory as all the others put together"(37). The other pilgrims describe him as "a prodigy. He is an emissary of pity, and science, and progress"(47). He has

written an eloquent seventeen-page report for the Suppression of Savage Customs which he begins by saying "we whites, from the point of development we had arrived at, 'must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings—we approach them with the might as of a deity'"(83). Yet, the postscriptum, "Exterminate all the brutes!"(84), scrawled evidently much later with an unsteady hand, implies his loss of restraint. Overcome by his instincts, he has suffered alone facing the dark abyss within himself. Marlow explains that he "hated all this, and somehow he couldn't get away"(93). He continues that:

the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. It echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core . . . (95)

Kurtz's very existence terrifies Marlow, since Kurtz can "not appeal in the name of anything high or low" and, moreover, there is "nothing either above and below him, and [he knows] it. He [has] kicked himself loose of the earth"(107). To him, Kurtz is the "Shadow—this wandering and tormented thing"(106) to which every civilized man could be reduced without his idealism. However, Kurtz, having faced the truth of himself and survived the corruption by becoming a primitive god, has achieved a voice to be heard. Marlow finally hears his voice—the voice of the "enlightened" civilized man—which ultimately reveals the darkness of the reality of the modern world; before his death, "with the expression of sombre pride of ruthless power, of cavern terror—of an intense and hopeless despair on that ivory face," he cries "The horror! The horror!"(112) He, who has stepped over the edge, while Marlow has been permitted to draw back his

hesitating foot, utters his voice, which has "pronounced a judgment upon the adventure of his soul on this earth" and ultimately on "the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts, that beat in the darkness"(113). Marlow believes that it is "an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it [is] a victory"(114). The voice of Kurtz is "the pulsating stream of light from the heart of an impenetrable darkness"(79).

Having faced the darkness of reality as opposed to the bright idealism he had followed, Marlow is disturbed by the sight of a civilized city and its people upon returning to England. He expresses his contempt towards their ignorance about reality as follows:

I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer; to dream their insignificant and silly dreams. They trespassed upon my thoughts. They were intruders whose knowledge of life was to me an irritating pretense, because I felt so sure they could not possibly know the things I knew. Their bearing, which was simply the bearing of commonplace individuals going about their business in the assurance of perfect safety, was offensive to me like the outrageous flauntings of folly in the face of a danger it is unable to comprehend. I had no particular desire to enlighten them, but I had some difficulty in restraining myself from laughing in their faces, so full of stupid importance. (114)

In this way, just as he turns against the other white pilgrims in Africa, he isolates himself from the crowd. Moreover, he is haunted by the shadow of Kurtz. He hears his voice again upon meeting his Intended. She asks him what Kurtz's last word was so that she might be able to survive with it. Although he

confesses earlier that he detests a lie because its “flavor of mortality” appalls him(49), he lies and tells her that it was her name, not only because he is loyal to Kurtz and wishes his voice to remain in the mind of his Intended, but also because the truth “would have been too dark—too dark altogether”(123). In the darkening room, the Intended appears exactly like her portrait in Kurtz’s painting, having the evening light on her forehead in the darkness as if representing the idealism of civilization again.

Unlike Marlow, “I”’s exploration into the darkness of reality comes through the letter which Sensei writes before committing suicide. His letter reveals that his distrust of “the whole of humanity” comes from his experience of being betrayed by his own uncle, who cheated him of his inheritance. Like “I,” he was a naive university student coming to Tokyo, when his parents died. The recognition of human depravity has made him a misanthrope: “that people could not be trusted must already have been a conviction deeply rooted in [his] system”(149). As a victim of man’s greed, he suggests to “I” that no man is immune to the temptation of material success, especially of money. Moreover, he implies the human potential to be evil, which, he adds is, “so frightening about men”(61) because, give “a gentleman money, and he will soon turn into a rogue”(64). At that moment, being unworldly, “I” is disappointed by Sensei’s material concern and does not understand the importance of his remark. All he realized was that “the beautiful sky began slowly to lose its brightness” and the delicate, green maple leaves seemed to “grow darker in color”(63).

Having been a victim of human depravity, Sensei eventually finds that it is not only money but also love that can make men egoistic ironically from his own betrayal to his closest friend, K. After coming to Tokyo, the experience of living with Okusan, the landlord, and her daughter, Ojosan, gradually eases his pain of the past, and he comes to feel affection for Ojosan. Yet, his love for

her changes the course of his life because he proposes to her despite his awareness of K's love for her, and K, presumably because of this, commits suicide. Before K's death, Sensei constantly attempted to reveal his own love for Ojosan to him. Yet, he felt that between them lay "the insurmountable wall" which did not allow them to go "beyond abstract theorizing"(188). After his death, seeing the blood on the wall which has "gushed out in one tremendous spurt" from K's carotid, Sensei marvels "at the power of human blood," which suggests to him the power of human instinct usually sublimated by the restriction of civilization. The blood has opened his "blindness"(220) and has made him face the truth about himself. He confesses as follows:

I thought that in the midst of a corrupt world, I had managed to remain virtuous. Because of K, however, my self-confidence was shattered. With a shock, I realized that I was no better than my uncle. I became as disgusted with myself as I had been with the rest of the world. Action of any kind became impossible for me. (238)

Sensei was born "an ethical creature, and [he] was brought up to be an ethical man"(128). Yet having experienced the betrayal of his own blood, he comes to feel "free"(159), a concept associated with the modern age, from an old notion of ethics, and he consequently finds himself corrupted by betraying K. Yet his own ethics, which are different from those of the modern age insofar as he does "not borrow them for the sake of convenience as a man might a dress suit,"(128) does not allow him to forget about himself. Having inflicted solitude on himself, he says, "If I wished to move at all, then I could move only towards my own end"(244). The death of Emperor Meiji finally makes him decide to commit suicide, which he describes as *junshi*, following one's lord to death, the ultimate way to express one's reverence to the authority, for the spirit of Meiji. He explains that he is "overcome with the feeling that [he] and others, who [have]

been brought up in that era, [are] now left behind to live as anachronisms”(245). For him, the Meiji spirit does not merely mean reverence for the emperor or nostalgia towards the unity the Meiji era represents. It refers to the era in which the old ethics and the concept of a new age collide. Thus, it represents the emotional dilemma he has undergone.

The deaths of K and General Nogi also exemplify the dilemma of the modern world. K, as an idealist, follows Buddhist doctrines and also reads the Bible and the Koran. For him, opening himself to his passion for Ojosan would be a sign of spiritual corruption. After his death, Sensei wonders whether K committed suicide “because his ideals clashed with reality” (240). General Nogi’s *junshi* also represents the agony of the Meiji spirit in which he had been waiting for thirty five years since he lost his banner in Seinan War to redeem his honor through death. Under the concept of the modern age, the word *junshi* is almost banished. Yet it is the only way for him to resolve his dilemma. Sensei wonders when “he suffer[ed] greater agony—during those thirty five years, or the moment when the sword enter[ed] his bowels” (246). Suffering from emotional conflicts, these three individuals are subjected to loneliness, which Sensei describes as “the price we have to pay for being born in this modern age, so full of freedom, independence, and our own egotistical selves”(30). Before committing suicide, he asks himself whether “K had experienced loneliness as terrible as mine, and wishing to escape quickly from it, and killed himself”(240). For those who struggle for life in the restlessness of the modern world, it seems to be the only question they can ask themselves: “Why did I wait so long to die?”

Like Kurtz, who was confronted with the truth about himself, Sensei has also achieved a voice to be heard. He explains his motivation to write as follows:

My own past, which made me what I am, is a part of

human experience. Only I can tell it. I do not think that my effort to do so honestly has been entirely purposeless. If my story helps you and others to understand even a part of what we are, I shall be satisfied. Only recently, I was told that Watanabe Kazan postponed his death for a week in order to complete his painting, *Kantan*. Some may say that this was a vain sort of thing to do. But who are we to judge the needs of another man's heart? I did not write simply to keep my promise to you. More compelling than the promise was the necessity which I felt within me to write this story. (247)

His voice forces "I" into "the shadow of this dark world of ours" —into "the moral darkness"(128). For he not only faces the truth about human nature but also confronts the darkness of his own heart; he leaves his dying father, impulsively grabbing Sensei's letter with his "free hand"(119). Furthermore, he has to lie to Sensei's wife since Sensei had wished that "her memory of [him] should be kept as unsullied as possible"(248). Under this circumstance, "I"'s loneliness seems to be inevitable. Since Sensei denies the possibility of mutual understanding, it seems to be inevitable that "I," as a modern man, reaches the same conclusion that no "two separate human beings"(246) can understand each other fully just as "no two trees had leaves of exactly the same color"(57).

Having explored the darkness of the human heart and of reality, two youths, Marlow and "I," share the same fate in which they have to lie to women. Interestingly, the representations of women in both novels are similar in that they present women as the ornamentation of the world. In *Kokoro*, Sensei describes "women as the personification of beauty in this world"(139). After K's death, he was relieved by the fact that Ojosan did not witness the scene because he was afraid "that a beautiful person such as she could not behold anything ugly and frightful without

somehow losing her beauty”(234). While in *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow says that it is “queer how out of touch with truth women are”(28) and continues that men “must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own”(80). Yet, beautiful as they are, women also represent the doorway to the darkness. Sensei’s wife, being the cause of Sensei’s betrayal, threatens him because for him, “she [is] like a chain that link[s him] to K for the rest of [his] life”(237). Similarly in *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow describes the two women in the Company office knitting “black wool feverishly” as “guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinising the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes”(26). By representing the beauty as well as the trigger to the darkness, in this way, women in both novels represent the idealism of civilization, which keeps the modern world elegant, thus appealing to people, yet, leads them to the darkness.

Therefore, the deception of women illustrates the irony of civilization; that Marlow and “I” lie to keep them away from the darkness ultimately suggests that they help the world maintain its beautiful idealism even though they have faced the truth—they are restrained from telling the truth because the truth “would have been too dark—too dark altogether”(123). This is the darkness of the modern world they are finally to explore in which the madness of Kurtz or the self-destruction of Sensei seems to be the only way out. The final scenes suggest their fates of being caught in-between: Marlow is on the boat heading into “the heart of an immense darkness”(124) and “I” is on the Tokyo-bound train setting off for Tokyo just as Sensei did after being betrayed by his uncle “watching suspiciously [his] fellow passengers”(149).

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