

# The Re-creation of Western Colonial Wars in Alejo Carpentier's "Like the Night"

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**Abstract:** *In this article, we attempt to provide a critical historical analysis of Alejo Carpentier's "Like the Night" in which we reveal how the writer manages to recreate, rethink, and counter, Western war history through an allegorical narrative. In so doing, we show how, by travelling back and forth in European history, the writer, through his protagonist, delineates different stages in the violent encounters between Europeans and people from other continents, people of different cultures. Through a close reading of the protagonist's narrative and monologues, we reveal how Carpentier attempts to delegitimize the conventional European narrative on the colonial experience by unmasking its real motivations and also by deconstructing the inner contradictions that it entails. As a critical reader, I highlight how this is realized in the story in the form of allegorical allusions. This necessitates an employment of interpretative analysis as well as an establishment of some connections between the story as a fictional work and some concepts related to post-colonial theory and post-colonial writing.*

**Keywords:** European war history; colonial experience; counter-narrative; historical analysis; Western civilization; the non-European other; post-colonial criticism; Alejo Carpentier; Like the Night; fiction

## 1. Introduction

To the lay reader, Alejo Carpentier's "Like the Night" may appear as a kind of jeu d'esprit-filled narrative wherein the author practises a constant time twisting game for aesthetic reasons. But by a close reading of the five-section short story, the text certainly reveals itself as an allegorical narrative pervaded with embedded realities about the disreputable history of Western European military contact with peoples and civilizations from outside the continent, realities, incapable of being disremembered or ignored, are bound to manifest in different scholarly works, be they fictional or non-fictional. Bearing in mind the unavoidable link between Carpentier's short story and the debatable post-colonial issues, an attempt at dissecting the deep allusions that permeate the story is, thus, made by putting the story under scrutiny within a post-colonial conceptual framework. Focus is laid on how the story formulates a retrospective review of the significant historical moments wherein Western civilization came into clash with its non-European counterparts not in a nostalgic recollection but in an implicit counter-argumentative manner.

### 1) The significance of time and space

By tracking the spatial and temporal movement of the story's protagonist, the young soldier, and also by reflecting on his attributes, assertions and feelings, we, as post-colonial critical readers, are encountered throughout the story with instances that signify, imply or allude to stands taken by Western European people who once were involved in the imperial enterprise. The young soldier, who is also the narrator of the events, is a representative of Western civilization in its violent encounters with other civilizations from ancient Greece up to the last stages in World War II. Drawing on this, themes related to the questions of "Self/Other", "representation", and "self-justification" are to be inferred from the events of the short story as well as from the way Carpentier makes use of time and space.

The spatial, more precisely the geographical, placement of the story events is of great allusive role. Being set in the first section of the story on Greek islands in ancient times, the young soldier preparing for war is a representative of the conventionally recorded beginning of Western civilization. Greece, by its engagement in war against the Trojans, is, thus embodying the inception of the European violent contact with other nations that would last endlessly throughout history taking different forms. Then, by moving in the second and third sections to Western Europe, namely to Spain and France, the narrator is a soldier in preparation for setting off to the "New World"; he is a member of an army about to start a mission of conquest and subjugation. He is, therefore, the voice of the imperialist, capitalist European leading powers at the time. The fourth part of the story takes us to modern times, exactly to the Second World War getting close to its end where the young soldier is on the eve of sailing to invade Normandy, German-occupied French territory, with the ultimate goal of putting an end to Nazi power over Europe. The narrator's journey this time is a journey "back" to Europe to restore order.

Approaching the three different settings aforementioned, we notice the shift in representing the enemy against whom the story narrator is going to fight. While in the first two settings, Greece, Spain and France, the enemy is an outsider barbarian, a non-European, overseas barbarian, the targeted enemy in the third setting is in the very heart of the continent. Thus, by means of his allegorical soldier's voice, Carpentier reveals how, realistically, Western civilization failed to maintain the long-held idea that the barbarian "Other" cannot come from inside; that cruelty is legitimate and, sometimes, necessary when it is exercised outside European borders on non-European peoples. Accidentally, or maybe not, in the same period wherein "Like the Night" was written, Aimé Césaire aligns with the same idea when he states in "Discourse on Colonialism":

He [the European] is being inconsistent and that, at bottom, what he cannot forgive Hitler for is not

crime in itself, *the crime against man*, it is not *the humiliation of man as such*, it is the crime against the white man, the humiliation of the white man, and the fact he applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India, and the blacks of Africa (Césaire 3).

In the young soldier's assertion that "this time we should finish off the Teutonic Order for good and all, and advance as victors into that longed-for future when man would be reconciled with man," certainly the "men" who should be reconciled with each other are white European men. His eagerness for reconciliation is totally absent when he, talking to his betrothed about his mission to the Americas, declares, "even though it might involve a few Indians dying by my hand," or when he tells her that "the Word must be imposed by blood."

## 2) Delegitimizing the justificatory narrative of colonialism.

"Like the Night", for what it is intended to convey, can also be read as exposing the virtually traditional European way of justifying colonialism. Throughout the story, the voice of the narrator, a Western voice, is put in such a way as to make "political statements" about the motives behind European conquests of lands in different parts of the world. In his reported dialogue either with his mother or with his betrothed, the young soldier is maintaining a justificatory discourse. We find him talking, for instance, to his mother about the "high-minded aims" of their military mission or trying to make her "see the plight of all the poor idol-worshippers who did not even know the sign of the cross." In the very end of the second section, he boldly states that "it is always gratifying to have a brave son, on his way to fight for a splendid and just cause." The same justificative tone of this "justness" is maintained when the soldier is trying to convince his betrothed of the good reasons behind his journey by telling her that they were "undertaking the important task of civilizing the vast areas of forest lying between the burning Gulf of Mexico and Chicagua".

This fictional bid to justify European hunger for subjugating peoples from other nations and continents makes it feasible to put into dialogue the narrative "I" in "Like the Night" and the authorial "I" in Césaire's "Discourse on Colonialism". It is virtually the same debate that Césaire, in his article, terminates with declaring, "For my part, I make a systematic defense of the non-European civilizations." (Césaire 7) The soldier's self-justification is denigrated in the story through the voice of his "sweetheart" who, by picking up and referring to Montaigne's essays, is an embodiment of the voice of self-denigration which the narrator tries to bury by telling himself that "these errors only came from the resentment of a girl in love." The soldier's hypocritical justification of his military campaign is unveiled near the end of the third section when he implicitly admits that he has no interest in forwarding the Christian cause of liberating the holy places, thereby revealing the purely materialistic, capitalist motives behind European conquests.

In the first chapter of *Time and the Other*, Johannes Fabian starts with the sloganized statement "knowledge is power"

(Fabian 1). The same commonplace is emphasized in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (Said 32) which he explains as "being able to do that". This "ability" to subjugate other peoples by means of the power of knowledge is detectable, though slightly, in "Like the Night". In the third section of the story, being with his "sweetheart" in her room, the soldier shows his admiration for some scientific equipment that symbolizes European intellectual superiority, instruments including the astrolabe, the compass and the windrose, which not only symbolize European technical advancement, but also allude to the facility they provide in conquering distant parts of the world as they are all navigation instruments. His mention of the two European pioneers of cartography, Mercator and Ortelius, also shows this sense of self-confidence that comes from possessing knowledge, knowledge that does not only make it possible to subjugate other countries, but also serves to legitimize the imperial enterprise.

How the non-European is presented, or speculated on, in "Like the Night" is also intriguing. Throughout the story, we are faced with mystifying representations of the "Other" whom the story protagonist is going to confront. This mystification is applicable to all those he will fight against except for those he will face during the Great Landing for they are European too. In the first section we are told about the soldier's discomfort about the "insolence" of Priam, the Trojan king, and the "arrogant behavior of his subjects" that threatens Greek soldiers. Overseas people are pictured more mystifyingly and more bluntly in the sections depicting the narrator's preparation for his voyage to the "New World", either from Spain or France. Thus, we find the native inhabitants of the Americas, either through the voice of the soldier or through the voice of his mother or betrothed, being portrayed as savages who should be "freed from their barbarous superstitions", as women whom "the Devil kept in a state of paradisiacal nakedness", or as people whose land is fully inhabited by "Amazons and Anthropophagi".

What is more intriguing is that none of the characters, not the soldier nor his mother, father or betrothed has ever been to those places. All their judgements and pictures are based on conjectures; it is only the creation of their fantasy and exaggerated speculation made into "facts". The narrator, along with his parents and betrothed are, hence, an illustration of the European tendency to create an "Other" different from the "Self", exotic, barbarous and, most importantly, inferior. They are an illustration of what Said terms in his introduction to *Orientalism* the "intellectual authority" that enables Europeans to describe the non-European the way they prefer and to be the subject of any description of that "Other" (Said 19). Put differently, the soldier and the other main characters surrounding him are in the process of "creating" an "Other" suitable for the imperial enterprise.

## 3) The unveiled realities of Western narrative on the Other

Made into allegorical representative of Western civilization and thought by Carpentier, the young soldier, in his assertions, portrays overtly European superiority complex and contempt for other races. It is that feeling of racial

superiority over other races that Césaire (op. cit.) exposes by quoting Lapouge:

I know that I must believe myself superior to the poor Bayas of the Mambere. *I know that I must take pride in my blood.* When a superior man ceases to believe himself superior, he actually ceases to be superior... *When a superior race ceases to believe itself a chosen race, it actually ceases to be a chosen race*(Césaire 10).

By thinking to himself in the first section of the story, “although our courage is unmatched by any other race”, or in the second section, “we seemed to be men of a different race”, the narrator, especially by using the plural pronouns “our” and “we”, is an in-group voice representing European conception of racial identity. He is an allegorical, but also a realistic image, of how European humanism originating in the philosophy of enlightenment was, as Césaire calls it, “pseudo-humanist” in the sense that it was white-race-centred humanism.

The soldier’s feeling of superiority, both as a soldier and as belonging to a superior culture, is undermined near the end of the story. The feeling of emptiness and disgust, and later the loss of enthusiasm for war he feels is a sign that he starts to realize the failure of the ideology of war; he also comes to know the real motives of those who propagandize for war. To use Donald Shaw’s words, the unnamed soldier realizes that the ideologies and culture he belongs to has gone “bankrupt of spiritual values” (Shaw, 43). The voice of the veteran soldier in the last lines of the story reflects clearly the end of the soldier’s belief in the nobility of the cause he is going to fight for, the end of the myths propagated in favour of European wars. By asserting, “behind this enterprise and the noble ideas it had set up as a screen, a great many aims were concealed that would not benefit the combatants in the very least: above all to sell more pottery, more cloth, more vases decorated with scenes from chariot races, and to open new ways of access to Asia”, the old soldier makes an overt accusatory statement against the legitimacy of European war ideology. The story, thus, ends with unmasking the ugly truth of Western warfare history. It ends with the unnamed soldier becoming able to see, as Alira Ashvo Muñoz puts it, “behind the expressions of idealism of his superiors an obscure materialistic bent from the enterprise” (Muñoz, 119).

## 2. Conclusion

For post-colonial critical readers, “Like the Night” stands as a fictional window through which Alejo Carpentier encapsulates the history of Western violent contact with other civilizations around the globe. The story, by transcending the constraints of time and space, takes its readers in a journey of enquiry into the realities that has shaped the relationship between Western civilization and the rest of the world ancient times. This relationship has always been governed by the dichotomy of Self/other, or more precisely, European/non-European. To criticize this reductionist view towards the non-European, Alejo Carpentier exposes the contradictions that interlard it by bringing to light the horrors of the Second World War, a war

which, as can be inferred from the allegorical narrative, has refuted the long-held European rhetoric of just wars. The last military campaign in the story is totally different because it is not directed against “the different other”; it is against inner evils, evils of the white man which Carpentier’s unnamed soldier has always tried to conceal and to justify. Through the story, Carpentier, thus, gives the readers the chance, as Kaisa Ilmonen frames it, to “rethink the past” of Western colonialism.

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